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with John Bell

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**John Bell**, from Scotland, is a member of the Iona Community. He is a liturgist, preacher, and collector and composer of church music. His work takes him frequently to Eastern Europe, Asia, Africa, and Australia. He is well known in North America from numerous speaking tours and musical compositions published by GIA.

June 22–26, 2015

**The Curse of Literacy:** Most Christians in every age have either been unable to read scripture or have not had access to a Bible. Yet these people have much to teach us about scriptural literacy.

**Retell Me the Old, Old Story:** Some of the most familiar biblical texts fail to excite, incite, or bless us because the way they've been commonly read and expounded owes much to the cultural norms of a previous era.

**Missing Women:** Finding a monogamous Jewish patriarch requires almost as much work as finding a virtuous woman in the Hebrew scriptures. Why is this and can the situation be redeemed?

**The Importance of the Imagination:** The imagination is sometimes seen as the bogus gift of the Holy Spirit. Without it, our understanding of scripture will most certainly be diminished.

**What Shall We Tell the Children?** Are there other pertinent scriptures to teach young people besides Moses in the bulrushes, Daniel in the lion's den, and the Baby Jesus asleep in the hay?

by John M. Buchanan

## Tortured ends and means

PHILOSOPHERS AND ETHICISTS have long pondered whether a good and noble end justifies any means of attaining it. The age-old debate has come up again with the release of the Senate Intelligence Committee's report on CIA detention activities following the attacks of September 11, 2001. Consequentialists (like Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, and currently Sam Harris and Peter Singer) would argue that good outcomes justify the means employed to accomplish them. President Harry Truman reasoned that dropping atomic bombs on Japanese cities, killing hundreds of thousands of civilians, was justified because it avoided an even more ghastly loss of life in an American invasion of Japan.

On the other hand, deontologists conclude that the morality of an act derives from the act itself rather than the outcome. They are certain that killing or torturing people is always wrong even if it saves many more innocent lives.

Thirteen years after 9/11, we are discovering and pondering the details of the methods our government employed to track down the people who attacked us, their support networks, and those organizations and individuals who make no secret of their intent to harm Americans.

In the 1930s and '40s, Reinhold Niebuhr broke with Social Gospel and pacifist academics and journalists, including the editor of this magazine, because he believed that it was morally irresponsible not to respond with force to the rising fascist movements in Germany, Italy, and Japan. Moral responsibility requires resisting evil, Niebuhr reasoned. I find that argument

compelling. And I'm grateful for our armed forces and intelligence agencies and the men and women who devote their lives to our security.

That said, I can't agree that torturing a human being is justified if it produces greater national security. For one thing, the value and sanctity of human life is at the heart of our national ethics—and of Christian faith. This nation grew out of the conviction that individuals are endowed with unalienable rights. Although we are still struggling to live into that radical notion, it remains at the very center of who we are as a people. It is our core value.

In addition, Niebuhrian realists would acknowledge that torture does not produce reliable information. Torture sometimes works in the opposite way as victims of sustained physical pain may say whatever their torturers want to hear in order to stop the agony.

The United States military understands that fact and forbids torture, not only because it invites an enemy to reciprocate and endangers the lives of American soldiers who are captured, but also because the information gained is not always accurate or useful.

Senator John McCain is one national figure who argues against the use of torture. McCain's position on torture is grounded in his own experience as a POW. He was subjected to years of torture at the hands of his North Vietnamese captors. McCain says torture doesn't work and is always wrong. I agree.

## WHO'S BLOGGING AT CHRISTIANCENTURY.ORG?

Drew G. I. Hart explores discipleship and ethics at his blog **Taking Jesus Seriously**

Carol Howard Merritt surveys the religious landscape at her blog **Tribal Church**

Steve Thorngate blogs about public life and culture at **In the World**

CCblogs highlights posts from the CENTURY's network of independent bloggers

Various bloggers write for **Blogging Toward Sunday** (on the lectionary) and  
**Then and Now** (on U.S. religious history)

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# Glaucoma doesn't change the way your eyes look.



## It changes the way your eyes see.

If you're over sixty, or black  
and over forty, you are at high  
risk for glaucoma.

And the only way to detect  
glaucoma is through a  
dilated eye exam.

That's why it's so important to  
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## LETTERS

### Prayer on the go

I read Michael Lindvall's piece with great joy because my prayer life, even in retirement, is much like his ("Prayer on the go," Dec. 24). I do not pray eloquently most of the time, nor did I have all the "right words" when I was a pastor.

My only time set aside for spiritual stuff is the reading of the daily lectionary every morning at breakfast with my wife—at her initiative, not mine. I worship when I lead worship, particularly because I preach to an empty church early on Sunday morning—it is a form of prayer.

As a volunteer chaplain at the local hospitals, I prayed in the stairwells as I moved to the next patient or took a walk around the block once in a while when things got tense. Kenosis is the feeling—prayer is the answer. "The Holy Spirit speaks for us with sighs too deep for words" (Rom. 8:26) has been my guide in many circumstances.

Joe Miller  
Warren, R.I.

When I was a young pastor serving a tiny parish in the hills of northeastern Iowa, I attended a clergy gathering at which the presenter was a seasoned pastor of a large college-town congregation. The topic was prayer and spirituality. He began his presentation by saying, "I don't know about the rest of you fellows [no female clergy in 1967], but my prayer life is lousy." I sat there thinking, "You're probably selling yourself short. I'll bet you pray a lot more during any given day of the week than you're giving yourself credit for."

"Prayer on the go" affirms what I have long suspected: prayer happens in many unplanned ways in random times and places. It is true, of course, that "prayer prods" can help cultivate the discipline of prayer. Recently I received in the mail, from a devout laywoman in Nebraska, a "prayer square." She knits them out of yarn. They're three inches square, and mine lies on a table next to my recliner. I cannot look at it without laying my hand on it and firing off a prayer of thanks for one blessing or another. But I pray in lots

of random times and places, even when I'm not looking at the prayer square.

Michael L. Sherer  
Waverly, Iowa

Lindvall has captured the essence of a busy pastor's spirituality. I can relate easily, and his words brought many friends to mind.

It seems to me, however, that what he initially describes as "haphazard" is anything but. Although not monastic, as in adhering to the traditional hours, he does indeed have a prayerful rhythm to his days and weeks. And, like the Benedictines, his work does seem to be prayer. I know many a pastor, both urban and rural, who pray in the same manner.

Sara Jane Munshower  
Glastonbury, Conn.

### The call of philosophy . . .

John Caputo speaks of "churchgoers" and "going to church" ("A restless search for truth," Dec. 24). I wonder if these terms might be less than helpful. Rather than being people who "go to church," we have been baptized to be the church, the presence of Christ for others. Caputo's words about Mother Teresa point this out. Her actions were more than her own—they were Christ's. How so? As others have said: "In Christ we live and move and have our being."

Paul Hayes  
Warrenville, Ill.

Thank you for the interview with Caputo. I am a philosopher as well as a pastor, and I found myself agreeing with just about everything he said. I am delighted that he lauds Paul Tillich as his favorite theologian, and that he understands God as call rather than entity. We need more intellectuals like Caputo to save us from shallow religion.

Kenneth D. Stephens  
Claremont, Calif.

January 21, 2015

## Cuba's future

Pope Francis has again used his power in a transformative way, helping to broker a deal that opens up diplomatic relations between the United States and Cuba for the first time since 1959. The agreement between President Obama and Cuba's president Raul Castro includes a swap of prisoners and an easing of some restrictions on travel and commerce between the two countries.

The move toward normalizing relations is long overdue. The trade embargo imposed by the United States when Fidel Castro took power has done nothing to undermine the Cuban government's control over its economy or alter its abuse of human rights. Ordinary Cubans suffered the most from the sanctions. One of Cuba's leading dissidents said that most Cubans haven't been able to work for political change because seeking food and shelter has taken all their time and energy.

It remains to be seen whether the thaw in relations will lead to more political and religious freedom for Cubans. But that outcome is much likelier to happen now than under the previous policy of seeking to isolate Cuba. A joint statement from the National Council of Churches and the Cuban Council of Churches called on the U.S. Congress to lift fully the travel and trade embargo and to remove Cuba from the U.S. list of countries that support terrorism.

One dissident group in Cuba is demanding, according to the *New York Times*, that Cuba release all political prisoners, adhere to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (which Cuba has formally accepted but not implemented), recognize all civil society leaders, and accept constitutional reforms leading to free, democratic elections.

Catholic and Protestant churches in the United States have long sought to develop better relations with Christians in Cuba. Despite the restrictions on travel, delegations of Americans have found ways of visiting and supporting fellow believers in Cuba. This kind of exchange will almost certainly accelerate with the changes agreed upon by the two presidents.

In a column in the CENTURY last summer, church historian Philip Jenkins envisioned two possible but very different religious futures in a freer Cuba. One resembles the case of Brazil, where Pentecostals and evangelicals have experienced exponential growth in a once deeply Catholic country. The other case resembles that of East Germany, where years of rule by an atheistic state left severely eroded religious belief and practice of all kinds.

Whatever future emerges, giving Cubans the opportunity to interact through trade and travel with Americans offers them the best chance for expanding their political and religious expression.

**The move toward normalizing relations is long overdue.**

# CENTURY marks

**DAY FOR SOCCER:** For one day in December differences were set aside between Israelis and Arabs in the Haifa region of northern Israel. A soccer tournament was organized that brought together more than 200 Arabs, Jews, and Druze. The event was planned to mark the hundredth anniversary of the Christmas truce that took place on the front lines of World War I on Christmas Day. Legend has it that some German and British soldiers even played soccer. The soccer tournament in Israel came at a time when Israeli-Palestinian relationships were at their lowest point in years (*National Catholic Reporter*, December 20).

**MODEL CITY:** Dr. Mubarak Awad, a Palestinian psychologist who teaches at

American University in Washington, D.C., says that the city of Haifa, Israel, is pointing the way for constructive Israeli-Palestinian relations. Haifa has both Palestinian and Israeli policemen, judges, and schools. Meir Amor, an Israeli-Moroccan sociologist who teaches at Concordia University in Montreal, agrees. Amor taught at Haifa University for two years, where half of his students were Palestinians. He says students from both sides learned to be sensitive to others and to think positively about how to live together (*Peace Magazine*, January).

**WORK AND PRAY:** Glenn Hinson recalls his first visit to the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky with a group of Baptist seminarians. They heard a

talk by Thomas Merton on contemplation. One student asked Merton a question along these lines: "What is a smart fellow like you doing in a place like this?" Hinson expected a stiff rebuke from Merton. Instead, Merton said: "I am here because I believe in prayer. That is my vocation." It had never occurred to Hinson before to think of prayer as a vocation (*Weavings*, vol. 30, no. 1).

**CHEW AND PRAY:** The nuns at the Abbey of St. Walburga in northern Colorado have been raising and selling grass-fed beef for about seven years. They always have a waiting list for the organic beef. One sister sees a relationship between cattle and their life of prayer. "Praying with the scriptures is like chewing your cud," she says. "So all through the day, we're ruminating on it. We chew, chew, chew, swallow, regurgitate. So it's not just 'the Lord is my shepherd,' it's 'the Lord is my cowboy'" (NPR, December 22).

**ONLINE GRATIFICATION:** Marriage rates in the United States have been dropping for decades. Wealth inequality is one reason, since poorer people marry at a lower rate than other groups. The breakdown of traditional values may have something to do with it as well. Now some researchers are saying there appears to be more than a correlation between higher pornography usage on the Internet and lower marital rates among males between the ages of 18 and 35. Pornography is used by some in this group as an alternative form of sexual gratification (*Washington Post*, December 21).



"Are these the Top Ten Commandments?"

**CHRISTMAS LECTURE:** Pope Francis delivered a blistering Christmas greeting to the cardinals, bishops, and priests who run the Vatican. He named 15 of their sins that need to be atoned for and cured, among them vanity, lust for power, materialism, hypocrisy, and joylessness. He added that it is a good thing to have a “healthy sense of humor” (AP).

**DEATH PENALTY DECLINE:** The 35 people executed in the United States in 2014 represent the fewest number in two decades, according to the Death Penalty Information Center. The decline is driven in part by continuing legal disputes related to drugs used in lethal injection and by state moratoriums on the death penalty. The center, which opposes the death penalty, also found that the 72 death sentences issued in 2014 represents the fewest in 40 years. Perhaps most striking about the 2014 report was the fact that Texas, the perennial leader in carrying out the death penalty, was no longer alone at the top (as it has been for 17 years). It was tied with Missouri for the most executions, with ten (RNS).

**DEATH THREATS:** Jackie Carter, pastor of the First Metropolitan Community Church in Wichita, Kansas, says she has received death threats in response to gay weddings she has performed. The church has been vandalized too. Threats have accelerated since the state’s ban on gay marriage was struck down by a federal judge in November. The church has hired a security company and is hoping to install cameras on the exterior. Carter says, “I’m not going to change my message of inclusion, I’m not going to change my message of love, and I’m not going to stop marrying [gay] people” (KSN.com, December 5).

**TURNABOUT:** When Muslims in Kennesaw, Georgia, applied to open a mosque in a strip mall, the city council voted 4-1 against it. Protesters, many of them from out of town, said the Muslims would try to impose Shari‘a law, and some claimed the mosque would serve as an outpost for the radical Islamic State. The Muslims said they had been living peacefully in the community for years and have condemned

“**If the world’s full of anger, / and everybody’s got a gun / Then what should I say / to my teenage son?**”

— Hip-hop singer **Michael Franti** in the song “Same As It Ever Was (Start Today),” pleading for justice and peace in the wake of the police killing of two unarmed African-American men

“**The Smallest Coffins Are the Heaviest**”

— **Headline** on an article reporting on the Taliban killing last month of over 140 people in a schoolhouse in Pakistan, most of them children (World Policy Blog, December 19)

extremist Muslims. The attorney representing the Muslim group noted that a similar building request had recently been approved for a Pentecostal group. Threat of a lawsuit turned the Kennesaw city council around: the council members who voted against the mosque withdrew their votes (PBS NewsHour, December 20).

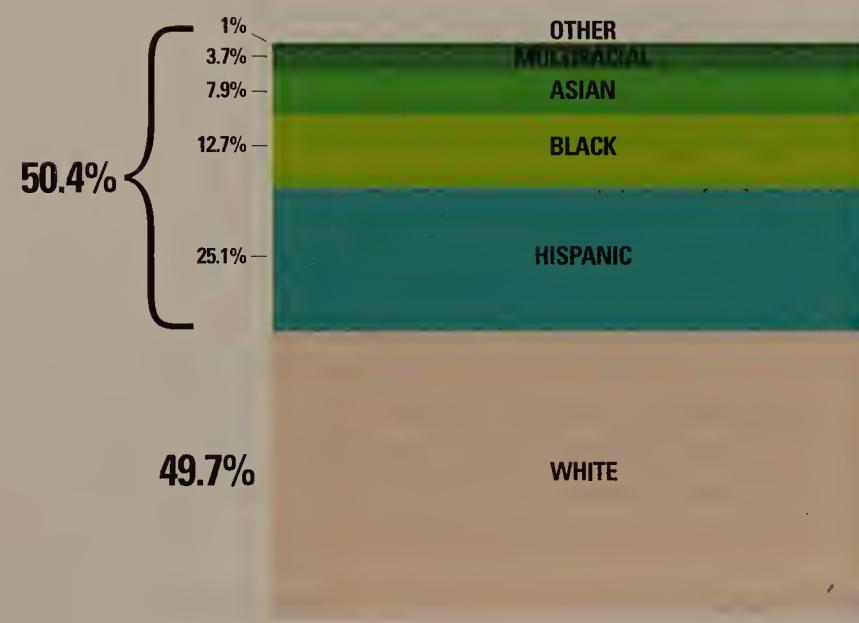
**HINDU NATION:** Mohan Bhagwat, the head of India’s most powerful Hindu group, has vowed to move ahead with a campaign to convert Muslims and Christians to Hinduism. Claiming that India is a Hindu country, he says that non-Hindus left Hinduism through coercive measures, and he wants to bring them back to the fold. Bhagwat’s right-wing party is the ideological wing of Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s

party. Modi has not made an official statement on the conversion campaign, although he has privately warned party officials against it (Reuters).

**URBAN LANDLORD:** The city of Paris is fighting gentrification in certain neighborhoods where it is pushing out low-income residents. Paris has identified 257 addresses with over 8,000 apartments for which the city is mandating that sellers give it right of first refusal when those apartments are put on the market. The properties are to be sold at market prices, although the city will set the price. The city hopes to provide more subsidized housing and keep more housing options available for low- and middle-income people. Real estate brokers are displeased with the plan (City Lab, December 19).

## MAJORITY MINORITY NATION

SOURCE: U.S. CENSUS BUREAU / BROOKINGS INSTITUTE



Projected  
racial  
makeup  
of the  
U.S.  
population  
in 2044

Due to rounding, total  
may not equal 100%.

How a building can serve a church's mission

# Asset management

by Susan Cartmell and Peggy O'Connor

MANY congregations regard their church property as an albatross—a huge maintenance burden. They tend to see church largely as a Sunday operation that takes place on a property that needs tedious and expensive maintenance during the rest of the week. But in our ministries in different churches over the years, each of us has discovered the importance of viewing buildings and real estate as assets.

What we've discovered—and it has been a learning curve for us, as well as for the congregations we've served—is that buildings and grounds can be leveraged to support congregational mission and extend the presence of the church in the community.

One issue many churches need to think about is the possibility of renting space in their buildings, and how to go about doing this. One common assumption is that allowing other groups to use the building is a form of evangelism—community members who use the space will be more likely to attend worship. In our experience sharing space in this way seldom leads to an increase in worship attendance.

Another assumption is that renting space is a form of benevolence. But this approach often leads congregations to help people who do not need help or enables groups to take advantage of a church's naïveté.

This reality became evident to us in one of our pastorates. The church had rented rooms to a franchised math tutor-

ing program. The church had determined a rental fee, but kept it low under the assumption that the church was supporting children's education. Soon it became clear that the church had underestimated how lucrative this tutoring program was and how much the church was adding to

## Real estate can be leveraged to extend the presence of the church.

the profits of a for-profit organization. Church leaders met again, researched the business, and set a more appropriate rent.

When the rental to the tutoring organization ended, leaders brainstormed: What other programs might use the available space for a fair rental fee?

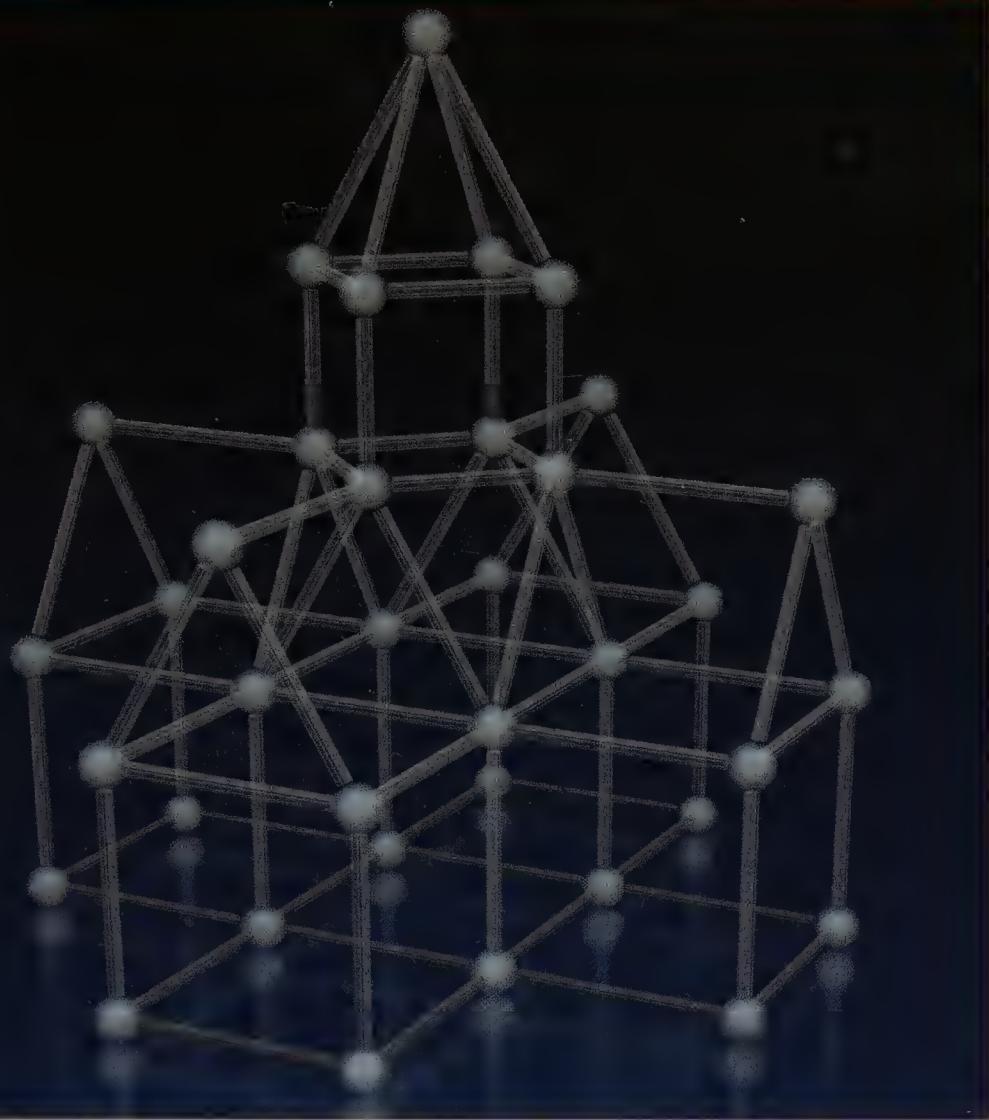
At one church, when leaders explored possible uses of the property they learned that there was a need for after-school care for middle schoolers. The church decided that it had space to devote to this project and that such a program fit well with the church's mission.

The church started a drop-in center that included homework tutoring, a computer lab, and supervised sports and games. The center was open to students of any or no religion, but the program was unapologetically Christian. It promoted cooperative learning, team-building games, and service to others, based on Jesus' teachings. Plus it offered a mix of intellectual, athletic, and social programs. The church hired seminary students and graduates as staff and recruited church youth as homework tutors. The church's youth minister served as director.

### Funny hospital saying

I'm not sure why I found it so endearing, the surgeon's always saying, upon hearing his patient's slightly hopeful rephrasing or reply just after he's been told the how and the why of the surgery or recovery, a fine-mineral fear inset in optimism, "From your mouth to God's ear." The surgeon said it encouragingly, with a smile. Considering it, it took me only a little while to realize what it signified: "We can't really know, but it's good to hope so. Who knows? Let's hope so. But also don't mistake my taking of a measure, my neutral explanation. Elsewhere is your treasure or rescue, if any exists. Nothing is promised, either." By then, I was content to drift in uncertainty's ether.

Brett Foster



The program opened with 14 students and was subsidized by the church for two years. Now it has over 40 students and generates enough revenue to cover all its expenses and subsidize the youth ministry budget. The center reaches new families in the community and has enhanced the church's reputation as a church with a great youth program.

It's important to note that from the beginning the congregation had a business plan that called for students' families to finance the costs. The church had discovered that there was a big difference between renting to a program it endorsed but didn't control and creating a program in its space that was part of both the church's budget and its mission.

Another church had a large building in the middle of town. With 300 members, many of whom were retired, the

church budget was strained by the needs of the building. The age of the congregation and its heavy dependence on investment income to maintain the building had led to desperation. Gloomy scenarios were often the topic of conversation.

The congregation made the effort to imagine how the building could be an

asset instead of a drain. It decided to open a thrift shop in an old parlor. The shop took donations and consignment items and would aid those who needed goods at low prices and, it was hoped, generate income. In the first year the thrift shop earned \$30,000 and is projected to take in \$50,000 the next.

In addition to providing this welcome revenue, the shop fulfilled another part of its mission statement: it helped victims of fire, flood, or other disasters by providing free clothing and household items.

The thrift shop ministry led to an outpouring of volunteers from the church who were delighted to be doing something concrete to help the church and the community at the same time. Instead of seeing their building as a burden, this congregation now sees it as a tool for mission.

Once we shift from thinking of property as a problem to recognizing its potential, we may find new ways to balance budgets and live out our mission. The approach can also help unite energies in the congregation: those who pour over financial statements and those committed to outreach can combine their efforts.

Congregations can learn to be more intentional about how their properties are used. Instead of being apologetic about their space, they should resist the temptation to undervalue or even give away their real estate. When they do this, they may discover that they have a treasure buried in their walls.

CC

## His eye is on the sparrow

When my grandfather was ninety-two,  
he swung at the first pitch he saw.  
He made contact.  
What we remember is not the roller towards short,  
or the stunned cheers of the church-supper crowd.  
What will not die is the briefest of moments  
when he broke for first, forgetting his decades.  
Habits of youth buried came sparkling to life.  
He broke for first, and unless our eyes deceived us,  
he tossed the bat away and pivoted like DiMaggio.  
It seemed—the grounder I mean—a luxurious grace,  
a sidelong benediction to brighten the waiting days.

**James M. Van Wyck**

---

Susan Cartmell is senior minister at the Congregational Church in Needham, Massachusetts. Peggy O'Connor is interim minister at the Pilgrim Congregational Church (United Church of Christ) in Harwich Port, Massachusetts.

## South Sudan clergy stand up for peace

**W**earing a white cassock, Catholic bishop Paride Taban strides through the mud and tents of the Jebel displaced persons camp in South Sudan's capital, Juba, on a recent Sunday.

Taban is here to conduct mass at this camp, where thousands of ethnic Nuer live under United Nations peacekeeper protection and in fear of Dinka soldiers outside.

"The church is to be with the suffering people, wherever in the world," the 78-year-old bishop said.

Taban has no trouble crossing South Sudan's ethnic lines to preach on Sundays. That's because in South Sudan church leaders are held in higher esteem than perhaps anyone else.

They earned that position through 50 years of struggle. Priests and pastors brought humanitarian relief to civilians during the heaviest fighting in South Sudan's long wars for independence from the hard-line Islamist government in Khartoum, Sudan. They lobbied the international community to support the southern cause and, crucially, brokered peace between communities torn apart by war and ethnic strife.

Yet in South Sudan's latest civil war, which just entered its second year, church leaders have been unable to seriously influence politicians and generals. Instead, they've been attacked by militants, sidelined at peace talks, and silenced at home.

It's a shocking change for South Sudan, a country whose existence in many people's minds is founded on the idea of religious freedom for Christians, who form the vast majority of the population. Now church leaders are saying they have to escalate their efforts to be a neutral, trusted force that can bring

politicians in line and lead the divided populace to reconciliation.

South Sudan's latest war began December 2013 when government troops began massacring Nuer in Juba. In response, the national army, called the Sudan People's Liberation Army, split along ethnic lines and a violent uprising began in the country's northeast, pitting Dinka loyal to President Salva Kiir against Nuer led by former vice president Riek Machar. Both sides have committed atrocities.

From the start, church leaders were shards of light in the grim conflict. Priests, pastors, and nuns protected civilians from extremists on either side, at times standing up to armed men with little more than a cross necklace for protection.

Yet in Juba and in the flash-point towns of Bor and Malakal, which saw

some of the heaviest fighting, churches and clergy came under attack. Priests were murdered, and in some instances, civilians were slaughtered in churches where they sought refuge. The Presbyterian Church alone lost nine clergy. By May, civilians were leaving church compounds, saying they no longer felt safe inside.

"In this situation, like in Rwanda, the blood of the tribe has become thicker than the blood of the Christ," said Episcopal bishop Enock Tombe, who leads a religious delegation at the peace talks.

By mid-year, as the fighting died down with the onset of rains, so did direct violence against churches. But another problem arose. The churches could not get their voices heard.

The warring parties refused church



**WORSHIP IN DISPLACEMENT:** Catholic bishop Paride Taban leads mass in an airplane hangar at a displaced person's camp outside Juba, where thousands of ethnic Nuer have taken shelter from the war in South Sudan.

participation in peace negotiations until June and repeatedly boycotted the talks afterward to prevent religious groups and other unarmed actors from participating.

In government-controlled areas, Catholic radio stations have been censored and shut down and staff thrown in jail. There are reports of rebel hard-liners threatening or even attacking pastors for preaching moderation.

Government security agents even attempted to shut down a Catholic church-led peace march held in Juba December 16 to mark the war's first anniversary.

But the attacks have not stopped South Sudan's religious leaders from speaking out. Clergy have condemned the violence as "evil," calling the country's leaders "dry bones" in need of spiritual renewal. They've urged civilians not to follow the warlords like "cattle" and lamented that politicians view those who die as "just grasshoppers," not caring.

Meanwhile, leaders like Taban—known for his nonjudgmental approach to peace building in previous wars—have used more conciliatory approaches, attempting to consult and advise. But the politicians have not changed course.

"Has it fallen in a dead ear?" asked Taban, who said he has been trying for months to have a private meeting with President Kiir without success.

"The political leaders think that their side of the story is always correct—they don't want contradiction," said Tombe. [They ask us] "Why do you speak as if you are with the rebels?"

To some, the churches' struggle to be heard is a sign of their weakened influence since the last war. John Ashworth, a longtime adviser to South Sudan's churches, said clergy are less united than they were during the long wars as each denomination has focused on rebuilding its own.

Important clergy left the cloth when presented with other opportunities in peacetime.

"Some of our good people, because of money, salaries, they join the government," Taban said.

Others lost focus. At a recent synod of one church in Juba, the main issue on the agenda was not peace, but pornography.

But to others, disrespect for the church by top politicians is a sign of a deeper problem, one that strikes at the heart of the nation's history.

South Sudan's independence struggle was often considered a fight for religious freedom for the mostly Christian south against the Islamist government in Khartoum.

SPLA propaganda perpetuates this story, referring to the churchgoing President Kiir, for instance, as the Joshua who took South Sudan to the promised land of independence after the 2005 death of the Moses, SPLA founder John Garang.

But this story never accorded with the facts. The SPLA began as a Marxist-influenced movement backed by Ethiopian communists. Taban points out that during the long war, the SPLA—ostensibly fighting for southerners like him—imprisoned him for 100 days after he broke through a siege to bring food to civilians under attack.

Tombe said the atrocities of the latest war fully explode the myth of the SPLA as Christian liberators.

"These politicians cannot claim" to be Christian, he said. "Even if they go to church on Sunday, they are not guided by Christian values only. They may be Christian by name, but Christian values have not really penetrated." —Jason Patinkin, *The Christian Science Monitor*

## Barriers between Israel and Palestinian territory also block relationships

When Linda Casher moved to an Israeli collective near the Gaza Strip as a young American woman in the 1970s, she would often mingle with Palestinians at outdoor markets amid the mounds of pomegranates and rows of hanging chickens. She even welcomed Palestinian women from Gaza to her kibbutz.

But the closest she has gotten to a Palestinian from Gaza lately was when Hamas gunmen emerged from the sea onto a nearby beach in last summer's war.

Two miles south of this community stands a towering cement wall at the Erez checkpoint, the only Israel-Gaza border crossing for travelers. Israelis have not been allowed to enter the Gaza Strip in years. The number of Palestinian workers crossing daily from Gaza into Israel has dropped from tens of thousands to zero.

"We have a great big barrier between us and the Arabs, so we don't see them," said Casher, who sees the separation as imperative for security.

Twenty years of fruitless negotiations, three conflicts with Gaza in the past six years, and growing fears of extremism in the Palestinian territories and around the Middle East have all contributed to a skepticism among many Israelis that peace is possible. As hopes for a resolution have retreated, Israelis have increasingly walled themselves off from their Arab neighbors.

An Israeli who used to work as a lifeguard at a beach in the Gaza Strip remembers that not long ago he could ride his motorcycle to and from his home in Israel. Now he's barred from crossing into Gaza, an area he called home for more than 15 years.

The man, who did not want to be named, spent long nights on the sea with Palestinian fishermen, who split their profits with him. He helped them outside of work, too, sometimes resolving problems with Israeli tax authorities.

He and his Palestinian colleagues shared the attitude, "If you need something, I will help you."

Then, in the 1990s, Israel built a barrier around the Gaza Strip and handed control of civil affairs over to Palestinians. One day one of his Arab workers came to him and said he'd been detained, interrogated, and beaten by Palestinian authorities. They suspected him of feeding intelligence to his Israeli boss—wrongly presumed to be a security officer.

"They almost killed me because of you," the worker told him. "I will never come [to work] again. I just wanted to come and tell you."

In the West Bank, Israel erected a serpentine barrier and heightened security coordination with the Palestinian Authority. Although 30 percent of the barrier has yet to be constructed, a Palestinian

suicide bombing hasn't happened in the area since 2009. Some say that stems less from the wall and more from the role of PA security forces and a realization that violence doesn't pay. But in many minds, the barrier stands as a defense against terrorists.

In fact, barriers—reminiscent of the ancient Judean fortresses—are now widely embraced as an effective way to fortify modern Israel despite the international opprobrium they bring. In 2013, Israel completed a 145-mile fence along the Egyptian border at a reported cost of 1.6 billion shekels (\$430 million).

The same year, Israel refurbished its outdated fence along the Golan Heights border with Syria with concertina wire, electronic sensors, and infrared cameras. With a long barrier already in place along the Lebanese border, that leaves only one section of Israel's land boundaries unfenced—a section along the peaceful Jordanian border—and plans are under way to erect a barrier there as well.

Many young Israelis, such as the 14-year-old son of the former lifeguard in Gaza, can't remember talking with a Palestinian face to face.

"I don't hate Arabs; I hate Hamas," said the son, who wants to go into the Israeli air force. "There are some Arab people and Israeli people who want peace. But it won't happen, because of the terrorists."

With the two populations cut off from each other, Israelis often don't have a personal frame of reference against which to compare the rhetoric used in times of conflict.

"You don't see Palestinians, so you can envision them however you want," said Daniel Bar-Tal, a veteran political psychologist. "What people are afraid of the most is the unknown."

A forthcoming book, *Scenes from School Life*, depicts Israeli students who stand up for Arab rights as facing tremendous peer pressure, according to *Haaretz*.

"I'm ready to kill someone with my hands, and it's an Arab," said one student, adding her contempt for a girl who criticized those who want revenge against Arabs. "Those people have no place in our country—both the Arabs and the leftists."



**BARRIERS TO CONTACT:** A Palestinian town in the West Bank lies behind the separation wall built for security by Israel. Such barriers prevent interactions between Palestinians and Israelis that were once commonplace.

Whatever the motives, the increasing isolation of Israelis from their Arab neighbors will make peacemaking more difficult, analysts say.

It is also having an effect on business. As much as 40 percent of the Palestinian labor force once worked in the Israeli economy. Israelis took their cars to Palestinian mechanics, shopped for cheap goods in their souks, and flocked to Gaza's beaches. But now Israelis are banned from entering not only Gaza but Palestinian cities in the West Bank, which are under the control of the PA.

Despite the worsening atmosphere between Jews and Arabs, poignant examples of humanity still occur daily.

- A new bilingual anthology of Arab and Jewish Israeli authors, called *Two*, gives voice to 41 writers. "This is my homeland," said Tamar Weiss, one of the editors. "Literature and poetry is our field, and that's where we can do our little effort."

- In late August, an Israeli settler couple was headed home in the West Bank when several Palestinians threw stones at their car, causing it to flip over and land in a ditch. Other Palestinians rushed

to the scene, calmed the couple, and helped usher them and their toddler to a hospital. "I was afraid, but I know how to distinguish between terrorists and human beings, and these were human beings," the mother told the Israeli newspaper *Yedioth Ahronoth*.

- Yakov Nagen, a rabbi and member of the Interfaith Encounter Association in Israel, recently was an honored guest at an Arab man's wedding. Five years ago, during the Jewish New Year, the main fuse in the rabbi's home tripped, leaving the family with no electricity (observant Jews refrain from turning on anything electrical during such holidays). So he found a young Arab man who agreed to flip the power back on. "Everything comes from God," the Muslim said. During their exchange, it came out that the young man had resigned himself to never marrying after losing a loved one. Nagen shared the story of a friend who had been widowed by a terrorist attack, yet found the strength to rebuild her life. Inspired by a letter from the rabbi, the Arab man got married four years later and invited Nagen.—Christa Case Bryant, *The Christian Science Monitor*

## Black churches may no longer be at center of civil rights protest

Half a century after civil rights movement activists marched across the South, the black church is finding new routes for activism. But often, its clergy admit, churches are not leaders, and sanctuaries are no longer ground zero for the civil rights movement.

On December 14, which some churches dubbed “Black Lives Matter” Sunday, many people in the pews found themselves playing catch-up with the people who had already been on the streets.

Thousands of black churches—prompted initially by leaders of three historically black denominations and later joined by officials of mostly white and Hispanic faith groups—marked the day with black suits and dresses, litanies, and prayers to be counted among the throngs of Americans decrying recent grand jury decisions not to indict white police officers in the killings of unarmed black men.

Delman Coates, pastor of Mount Ennon Baptist Church in Clinton, Maryland, spearheaded the first conference of the progressive Black Church Center for Justice and Equality earlier in December.

“I hope that we can build the sentiment,” he said, “to really reclaim this tradition of activism and social justice advocacy, which is really at the heart of the black church.”

Coates and others say the black church—which he defines as a movement committed to freedom, not just a group of African-American worshipers—is being challenged by a number of factors, including young people who are not drawn to their pews and gay activists who are pushing for more welcoming attitudes from churches.

In a statement responding to the “Black Lives Matter” campaign, young adults of the African Methodist Episcopal Church urged its members to “find ways to connect with young adults who are not in our churches” and address their needs.

“Let us not become comfortable in

places or spaces of privilege as our privilege is only of worth if it serves as a platform to challenge the status quo,” they wrote.

African-American churches also struggle with whether to focus on only black concerns or on a broader range of issues. When some said they were going to focus specifically on praying for black males on that Sunday, women and gay activists called for greater inclusion.

“Black LGBT bodies must matter, too!” said a statement from Many Voices, an LGBT church group.

Alton B. Pollard III, dean of Howard University’s School of Divinity, said, “It really makes for some of our congregations to be betwixt and between.”

Jacquelyn Dupont-Walker, director of the AME Church’s Social Action Commission, said the challenges reflect a generational divide and a wider disconnect that needs to be bridged.

“We’ve become aware that the isms that the young people want to approach are broader than the isms that the historic black church is focused on,” she said.

The upcoming movie *Selma* depicts the Alabama voting rights marches led by Martin Luther King Jr. and other clergy, but today’s ministers acknowledge that they have a different role.

“I think what history is going to record is that this is the first movement in black history that’s not been led by the church or by a religious figure,” said Jamal Harrison Bryant, pastor of Baltimore’s

Empowerment Temple, whose members marched to a nearby mall after December 14 Sunday services for a “die-in” protest. “The church is jumping in to lend its support—not to lead it—which is a different place from where the black church has been historically.”

Even as leaders of the black church grapple with their roles and plan activism around updated legislation and police policies, new LifeWay Research surveys show that black clergy may have to lead the charge themselves.

Two-thirds of U.S. adults say religious leaders offer a positive role in the country’s race relations. The vast majority of African-American pastors (93 percent) said their churches were involved in racial reconciliation, compared with 71 percent of white pastors.

Leaders of the AME, AME Zion, and Christian Methodist Episcopal churches plan to continue discussing strategy to carve out their place in the latest cries for equal treatment.

“To assume we are at the forefront is erroneous,” said Lawrence Reddick, senior bishop of the CME Church. “We certainly should participate, and if people call us to leadership, we certainly should take the role of leadership. But leadership has to be earned by people who look at us and want to follow.”

And, he added, for some black clergy this may take some adjustment: “It may be a change we don’t all want to accept.”

—Adelle M. Banks, Religion News Service



PHOTO BY ADELLE M. BANKS / RELIGION NEWS SERVICE

**CHANGING MOVEMENT:** Members of Miles Memorial Christian Methodist Episcopal Church in Washington, D.C., join in prayer as the church observed “Black Lives Matter” Sunday on December 14. Clergy are not at the forefront of civil rights protests as they once were.

# Pakistan struggles with how to regulate religious schools

The killing of 134 children in a Peshawar school renewed concerns about Pakistan's unfinished agenda of uprooting militancy and intolerance.

On December 21 authorities arrested several suspects, but the identities of the seven Taliban terrorists involved is not yet clear. They are assumed to be graduates of some of the country's many *madaris* (plural of *madrasa* in Arabic) who wanted revenge for the Pakistani army's ongoing military operations in Waziristan. The Peshawar school served the children of army officers.

Leaders of Wafaq ul Madaris Al-Arabia—an umbrella body of seminaries—condemned the terrorist act. Yet these clerics now fear the government will crack down on the seminary system.

After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, religious seminaries proliferated in Pakistan with the aim of preparing foot soldiers, or mujahideen, to fight the communists. With assistance from the United States, the growth of these religious schools went unchecked as Pakistanis and youth from other Muslim countries enrolled alongside the Afghans.

But there was no governmental oversight on the seminaries' curricula and funding sources, and in 1996, prime minister Benazir Bhutto discontinued a requirement that new schools register with the state. The decision led to the mushrooming of unregistered seminaries with a narrow Islamist bent.

Pakistani law defines religious seminaries as institutions providing boarding and lodging.

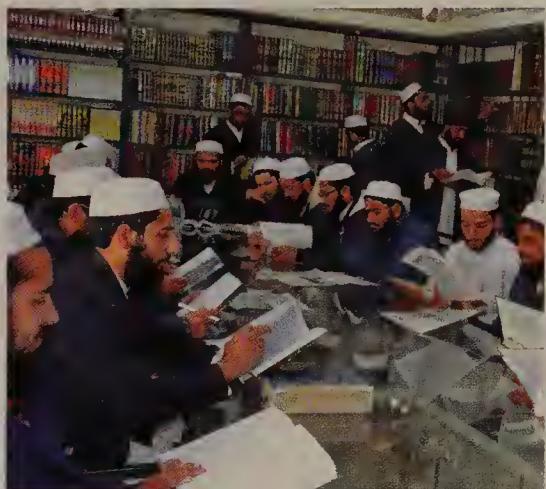
Two attempts have been made since September 11, 2001, to bring the autonomous seminaries into the mainstream. Pervez Musharraf, Pakistan's president from 2002 to 2008, briefly reinstated the registration process and required seminaries to submit audited financial statements along with a list of donors. But the military dictator lost interest in reform when it faced political challenges.

Through a memorandum of under-

standing with another umbrella organization of seminaries—Ittehad-e-Tanzeemate-Madaris—the schools consented to include science as part of the matriculation requirements. But the memorandum never became law because the government failed to produce legislation.

Each year, some 200,000 youth graduate from more than 26,000 religious schools, according to the ministry of religious affairs.

"Mostly the *madaris* graduates are either jobless or employed for less than \$100 monthly to work as prayer leaders," said Wakeel Ahmad Khan, a former secretary of religious affairs and an expert on seminary reforms. "They are creating jobless young people who have no career."



**SEMINARIES IN PAKISTAN:** The students of the Institute of Islamic Sciences in Islamabad study during a library class. The seminary is one that blends religious education with secular studies.

Analysts agree that such hopeless youth become easy prey to hard-line militants.

With the rise of the Islamic State, some hard-line seminaries are bracing to play a central role in a sectarian proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

"The growth of IS could result in a greater emphasis on anti-Shi'ite terrorism," said Arif Rafiq, an adjunct scholar at the Middle East Institute in Washington, D.C., who studies sectarian violence in Pakistan. "And, as a reaction to this, we may see a further radicalization of the Shi'ite."

But Rafiq said not all seminaries produce terrorists. And, indeed, many seminaries have opted to provide science, math, computers, and English-language lessons alongside religious instruction.

The Idara Uloom-e-Islami, or the

Institute of Islamic Sciences, in Islamabad is an example of a seminary that blends religious education with secular studies. It competes with Islamabad's elite schools. Its tenth and 12th grade students score on a par with students at state-run schools.

Sprawling over a nine-acre campus that is devoid of heating and curtains in the winter, the school has 581 students from across the country, housed in a four-level residential block.

"Only 17 percent of students can afford to pay our modest fee," said Faizur-Rehman Usmani, founding president of the institute. "We have to raise money for the teachers' salaries and everyday expenses."

The biggest challenge for the administrators has been high turnover of the teaching staff due to low salaries and lack of facilities or subsidies.

"Training of religious teachers is as important as introduction of modern sciences, literature, and arts in the curricula," said Abdul Ahad, an activist who grew up attending a *madrasa* and now advocates for reforming the system. "Extremism and intolerance is embedded in the culture and the curricula of the religious institutions, which must be replaced immediately."

Ahad advocates a more stringent supervision of seminaries.

"The government must have a greater role in determining their curricula, quality of teachers, and standard of examination by bringing them into the mainstream," he said. "The problem, however, has been incompetence in governance and lack of political will."

While the public mood in Pakistan is ripe for introspection and course correction at the state level, the government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has yet to address the long-standing issue of soaring religious intolerance.

"Sectarianism is a long-term challenge in Pakistan," said Rafiq, who researches policy making in Pakistan and writes a column for Pakistan's *Express Tribune*, an English-language daily. "It's resolvable, but it requires the country's political leaders to stand up for intersectorial unity and isolate agitators and terrorists who seek to deepen sectarian enmity."

—Naveed Ahmad, Religion News Service

# People



PHOTO BY KIPPA MATTHEWS

■ **Libby Lane** will be consecrated as the Church of England's first woman bishop at a ceremony at York Cathedral on January 26.

Lane, 48, a mother of two and the wife of an Anglican vicar, is currently a parish priest in Hale, a small village outside Manchester. Her appointment as the eighth bishop of Stockport, in the Diocese of Chester, will be as a suffragan bishop, a bishop subordinate to a metropolitan or diocesan bishop.

"This is unexpected and very exciting," she said. "I'm honored and thankful to be called to serve as the next bishop of Stockport and not a little daunted to be entrusted with such a ministry."

The church announced her appointment December 17, a month after changes to canon law made it possible for women to assume the roles of suffragan and diocesan bishops.

Prime Minister David Cameron described the church's decision as "an historic appointment and an important step forward for the Church towards greater equality in its senior positions."

Lane was one of the first women priests to be ordained, in 1994.

Only bishops in charge of dioceses—there are 41 in England—sit in the House of Lords, Parliament's upper chamber.

"I only wish Libby had been made a diocesan bishop instead of a suffragan bishop," said Christina Rees, a member of the House of Laity in the General Synod, the Church of England's governing body. "But she is still a bishop, and

that's thrilling news." —Trevor Grundy, Religion News Service

■ **Jon Pott**, vice president and editor in chief of Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, in Grand Rapids, Michigan, will retire on June 30.

Pott joined the publishing house as an editor in 1968. He has been editor in chief since 1982. During his tenure, Pott has overseen the growth of the company's yearly publishing output from approximately 70 titles a year to well over 100. He also played an active role in Eerdmans's acclaimed periodical *The Reformed Journal*, serving as editor in chief from 1982 until the journal's final issue in 1990.

"When I came to the company I intended to stay for one year," Pott said. "Forty-six years later, that is a deadline I am deeply grateful to have missed."

Pott has been especially instrumental in acquiring groundbreaking titles in ethics and bioethics, many of which arose from his decades-long participation in the Society of Christian Ethics. He also undertook special initiatives in Dead Sea Scrolls studies, religion and literature, and American religious history. Pott spearheaded publishing projects in conjunction with the Pew Charitable Trust, the Lilly Endowment, Emory University's Center for the Study of Law and Religion, and the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship.

"If—as I have been—one is in publishing first of all out of a love for language and ideas, Eerdmans is a wonderful place to be," Pott said.

Eerdmans will begin the search for a new editor in chief early this year.

In another change for the company, **Anita Eerdmans** became president and publisher in late December. She was previously vice president of marketing and of Eerdmans Books for Young Readers. She replaces her husband, William B. Eerdmans Jr., who had led the company since 1963, when he succeeded his father, William B. Eerdmans

Sr., who founded the company in 1911.

"I am humbled and honored to be entrusted with a job that has been filled by only two others before me in our company's 100-plus year history," Anita Eerdmans said. "It is my intent that we will continue to be faithful to the groundwork laid by Bill and his father before him, while facing the challenges of publishing in our 21st-century world."

Anita Eerdmans began her career in the Eerdmans editorial department in 1974 before moving into marketing. Since 2006 she has been responsible for the children's imprint Eerdmans Books for Young Readers, publishing titles that have won such honors as the Caldecott Honor Award for illustration, the Batchelder Award for translation, and the Schneider Family Award for books about disability, all given by the American Library Association.

Bill Eerdmans's legacy includes the expansion of the company's list beyond its Reformed Protestant roots to encompass books by Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Jewish authors, as well as many books on ecumenical and interfaith dialogue. His passion for justice and equality led to the publication of anti-apartheid books during that period of South Africa's history, as well as groundbreaking books on race, gender, and other social issues. He continues to be active in the acquisition and assessment of new projects for the company.

"I'm ever grateful for the lot that has fallen to me, that of following my father in steering this company to the prominence it has enjoyed at the hands of its authors, fellow workers, and the world near and far of booksellers and publishing colleagues," Bill Eerdmans said. "It's been exciting and inspiring. I am truly blessed in having as my successor my wife, Anita, who has, throughout our nearly 40 years of partnership, proven worthy of every confidence to further pursue our broad range of publishing interests."



PHOTOS COURTESY OF WM. B. EERDMANS PUBLISHING CO.

# LIVING BY The Word

Sunday, January 25

1 Corinthians 7:29-31

I OFTEN WONDER what the Saturday after Jesus' crucifixion was like for the disciples. For years they had come to know him—to work and sleep alongside him, eat and pray with him, travel with him in and out of so many people's lives. They walked in wonder and confusion each day, believing a new world was being ushered into existence. And then it wasn't. They woke up Saturday morning without him to greet them. They ate their first meal not hearing his voice blessing their fish and bread. Mourning soaked their steps that day, each mundane act crying out what was not and what would not be.

Paul's exhortation for "those who mourn" to live "as though they were not mourning" seems cruel, even delusional. I lost both my parents to cancer, my father when I was 17 and my mother when I was 25. Those empty days after their bodies had been rolled away still pit my stomach; they remain deep crevasses I peer into, knowing that if I enter, I won't return without darkness, pain, and struggle. Surely Paul is not asking me to pretend that there is no gap? No absence in the day or in the days to come?

This 1 Corinthians passage shows how even the ordinary is made new because of Christ. To buy as though they have no possessions, for those who have wives to be as though they have none, to deal with the world as though they have no dealings—these everyday practices are not to be resisted. Paul is not asking us to avoid the world. But if the form of the world is passing away, the mundane, too, is undergoing a metamorphosis. The everyday is becoming not a mark of absence but a step into promise.

The days following my mother's death were punctuated with loss, with absence. Each meal was one more meal I would not share. Then I was reminded of Jesus' visit to Jairus's daughter. "She is only sleeping," Jesus says. In the gap between when Jairus sends for Jesus and his daughter's seemingly last breath, Jairus must think it's too late. All he can see is loss. But Jesus' arrival means that this breath was not her last, that Jairus's mourning is not the finality he imagined. His daughter will wake, and he will hold the child he thought was dead, now returned to him.

To say my mother and my father are only sleeping is not to forget their absence. It is to orient my living and my eating toward their return, to a rejoining of their body and soul—to our familial communion.

"The present form of this world is passing away," says Paul. These words lead us not away from the significance of the everyday but into a deeper experience of the transformation

that lies at its center. Mary's preparations that Saturday evening are oriented toward comforting the absence the tomb represents. The empty tomb that awaits her transforms these preparations into activities of expectation—flowers of memorial to signs of life inhabiting the world, now and forever.

What happens when the church buys not to possess, but to give? When we deal with the world not in its machinations of power, violence, and greed but as though every body were seen and embraced and desired by God? When we act as though such dealings take us into spaces of unrelenting commitment to one another's flourishing, rather than a devotion to the lies of self-sufficiency?

To say, "Christ has died. Christ is risen!" is to imagine our daily lives animated by a purpose and possibility undulating beneath the surface. This makes our individual lives icons of the in-breaking of God into our midst, bringing the end and beginning to a bursting present. Mary prepares flowers for her son. She prepares to attend to the grave of a son plucked from the world not by a crazed individual or by his own misguided criminal life. He is an innocent man who provoked through his faithfulness, who dared to live a life that asked questions of the world's authorities. Mary visits the grave of a man whose life was robbed from her, who was murdered at the hands of the state.

To recognize this is to see our individual mourning or buying or marrying or dealing with the world as more than individual moments. Our lives are tied to a larger system that is itself wrestling with the reality of God's presence in the world, with God's desire for creation to be whole and loved and loving and just. We are tied together in Christ, our lives and everyday moments all flowing with—or against—God's reconciling work.

In recent months our society has seen a collective in-breaking of people filling the streets. "To those whose lives are said not to matter," they say, "live as though #blacklivesmatter," as though our black bodies have profound dignity. These bodies are rendered invisible in the media, systematically branded by the criminal justice system, killed with impunity, rendered silent in our schools. But we write and chant and march to testify that although such lies are made incarnate, our God entered into a life of marginalization, disrepute, and state-sponsored violence—allowing his hands and feet to be branded with marks of criminality.

This God was not in the tomb that Sunday morning. Christ has made our words into song and our steps into quakes of justice. What has been called low will be called high. We will mourn as those who do not mourn. We will march as though justice lies beneath our feet—waiting only for the tremble of our collective voices to crack the veneer of society's passive violence against the seemingly invisible.

# Reflections on the lectionary

Sunday, February 1  
Deuteronomy 18:15–20

**IN THE UNFOLDING** drama that is God's love for creation, I am repeatedly reminded of how distorted my sight is. Idolatry seems like such an easy thing to avoid. No wooden statues on the mantel, no lockets with Zeus pictured within.

But it's never that easy, is it? Idolatry isn't solely a matter of the artifacts that fill our lives. More often idolatries are the ways our lives coalesce, imperceptibly, around the "invisible unholy." Idolatry's normalcy becomes a comfort, and this comfort is taken for nature. After centuries of this—the deaths of dark bodies in the next town, the wailing of Afghani faces covered in the rubble and dust of a drone's missile, the news of settlements built upon the crushed homes of dispossessed land—these realities seem not only inconsequential but almost necessary. We hurry to believe the justification of death before we even mourn the dead.

Prophets are inconvenient reminders of our everyday idolatries and how they have hardened to become structures of death. As the children of Israel enter a new land, they desire a prophet. What are they hoping for? Do they know what they are asking for?

In the midst of entering a new land, of setting feet into promise, we are always faced with promise and peril. Deuteronomy draws us into Israel's preparation for life in lands of liberation. With the chains of Egypt behind them, they anticipate life in a new land—a land that signifies their covenant with God. Though Moses will not join them, the promise of a prophet like him enjoins Israel to resist the idolatries of the land. Their lives are to be unequivocally devoted to God, molding their lives and beings into God's purposes in this new land. The priest will teach and call—yet the people will find themselves in bondage to the land, to the ideas and dependencies of their carved gods and their worship of fellow creatures.

"God will raise up a prophet like me from among your own people," says Moses. In the face of these realities God will send a prophet like Moses—one whose life miraculously points to God's calling, to God's plucking out of death and setting upon firm ground. But this prophet will come from among "your own people." This prophet will not be a stranger with a new perspective or one with expertise that does not already reside within the community. "Your own people" suggests a more dif-

ficult prophet to hear—one who is familiar, who is known, who sees us in our daily lives and who is perhaps easy to ignore because we see her or him every day, too. Or at least we think we do.

This prophet will speak to us in God's words, words that cut deep because they are folded within the days that we have shared. The prophet sees how we eat, and who eats with whom. The prophet sees who is made to fetch water by themselves and whose stomachs churn with hunger while others eat their fill and toss extra to goats and sheep. Called from within a people, the prophet will speak to us of idolatry—not in the abstractions of belief and worship, but in the grounded realities of my neighbor's field and the foreigner's family. The prophet will point out my unfaithfulness in the patterns of my day and the ordering of our villages and towns and cities.

And we will resist her by calling her crazed or too radical or too emotional. We will resist because if we can't dismiss her, then too much has to change in our lives. If she is right, we will have to take the idols out from beneath our fine clothes and our beautiful homes and stable lives. We will have to discover that they are dry sand, creations of our own making.

## The prophet sees how we eat, and who eats with whom.

But the prophet is never, herself or himself, the pinnacle of sight or the ideal of what God demands. She speaks as one called—as a vessel through whom God speaks even as the speaker struggles to discern the meaning of her own words. To speak a word that has not been commanded is to have faith in ourselves as speakers rather than in the God who speaks through us. The prophet stands in between. Drawn out of her own people to speak words that are not hers, she can never truly return to the people she had called hers. Like Moses, she leads a people into a land she may not enter. She sows so that God will reap.

God has given us prophets from our own people. How do we receive them? Do we name them too crazy, too radical? Do they press us with a truth that cuts too deep? Or will we hear them—receiving the words of those whose lives display the courage and risk to lead others to a place they themselves will not know? Will we face our own idolatries and betrayals?

*The author is Brian Bantum, who teaches theology at Seattle Pacific University.*

On marriage and other covenants

# A long obedience

by Katherine Willis Pershey

IT IS STRANGE to think of a particular person as the person with whom I did not have an affair. There are, in fact, many people with whom I have not had an affair. Billions. I have never slept with the mailman, or kissed my ex-boyfriend, or flirted with a stranger (at least not on purpose—sometimes I can't contain my natural charm). Since I've never been unfaithful to my husband, there are a remarkable number of people with whom I have not committed adultery.

And yet there is one man I cannot help but think of as the man with whom I did not cheat on Benjamin. We had no improper physical contact, no inappropriately intimate conversations. I don't even know if the attraction was mutual. There was, however, temptation. I felt desire. And when it comes to marriage, temptation and desire are nearly as shameful—nearly as sinful—as actually giving in. Just ask Jimmy Carter, who infamously confessed to *Playboy* magazine, “I've looked on a lot of women with lust. I've committed adultery in my heart many times.” Carter's words made the nation cringe. But Jesus was the first to equate lust with adultery of the heart.

It doesn't seem fair. When my jeans start to fit too snugly, I track my diet. I don't have to tally up the slice of German chocolate cake I didn't eat. It doesn't matter how hungry I am, how badly I long to devour that frosting with a spoon and let it dissolve on my tongue until only flakes of sweet coconut remain. I could look up recipes for German chocolate cake in my ridiculously large library of cookbooks. I could buy all the ingredients at the grocery store after work. I could bake the damn cake, and so long as not a single morsel passes through my lips, I haven't done anything worth reporting to MyFitnessPal.com.

Having never actually had an affair, I'm no expert. But I reckon this is how it goes: you think you can have your cake without eating it, too. Invariably, you give in and indulge. And that's fine if the cake is just cake; you just won't be able to zip your trousers tomorrow. But if the cake is our handy metaphor for the man to whom you are not married—well, congratulations. You've committed adultery. Even if you never unzip your trousers, you've managed to carry on a doozy of an emotional affair, and by any definition, you've committed adultery in your heart.

When I realized that I had feelings for this man, I was shocked. I dearly love my husband, to whom I have been married—mostly happily, and decidedly faithfully—for more than a decade. I almost didn't recognize the crush for what it was, it

had been such a long time since I'd had one. It was disorienting, terrifying, the slightest bit exhilarating—like being on a roller coaster but knowing full well that upon hitting the last loop-de-loop, your car will derail and you will plunge to your death. My internal alarms all tripped at once, clanging an overwhelming and persuasive warning. *Danger, danger.*

*Danger*, even though it wasn't primarily a physical attraction. If he had been an Adonis with a middling personality, I

**Don't believe anyone who says otherwise: fidelity can be very sexy.**

would have joked with my husband about my exceedingly hot new friend, just as he's been known to wink at me as he volunteers to take our kids to their gorgeous pediatrician. Rather, this man was brilliant and kind and—well, I'm not here to drool over the cake. The point is, I wanted to be friends with him. I didn't want to turn around and run the other way. I wanted to practice impeccable fidelity to my husband, and I wanted to do this without opting out of what seemed to be a fairly lovely potential friendship.

I did the only thing I could fathom: I told my husband everything. Even though there wasn't much to tell—oh, how profoundly glad I was to go to him with a clean conscience!—the conversation was risky. Would it wound Benjamin to know that his wife, though delivered from temptation, had experienced it? Yes, it did. But it was a hurt he could sustain, because he understood that at the root of what I was telling him was that I was trustworthy. I had been tested and proven faithful.

**A**s we pondered the nuances of fidelity, a curious thing happened: our love for and attraction to each other deepened. Benjamin trusted me to nurture the new friendship. I established the boundaries that would govern my platonic relationship with this man to whom I am not married, and in so doing, I rediscovered the intrigue of my

*Katherine Willis Pershey is associate minister at First Congregational Church in Western Springs, Illinois.*

delightfully unbounded relationship with the man to whom I am. There is yet more for us to know of each other, physically, spiritually, emotionally. And as husband and wife we have the incredible freedom to explore each other without hesitation or shame. There is nothing to stop us from growing ever more intimate. Don't believe anyone who says otherwise: fidelity can be sexy. Very sexy.

In the time since I was, as we pray, "delivered from temptation," I've encountered countless stories of infidelity. They are everywhere; they always have been. They are featured in films and literature. They provoke salacious headlines and awkward institutional announcements. I receive these stories just a hair differently nowadays. You would think I'd be more understanding, having stood at such a precipice myself. I'm not. If anything, I'm more inclined to indignation. *I walked away, why couldn't you?* I fumed the last time a pastor publicly confessed to adultery. (Why is it so much worse when clergy cheat? Is it because we generally have access to mental health resources and systems of accountability? Or is it because we have an even greater obligation to honor the covenants we make?)

My spiritual director had to remind me of John's story of the woman caught in adultery: *Put the rock down.* Wise teaching, but I still think it's helpful to recall the exceptional significance of fidelity in the biblical tradition. The prohibition against adultery is, after all, written in stone. And infidelity in marriage is intimately related to infidelity to God—because each is a covenant relationship.

A covenant is an agreement not unlike a contract, save for one minor detail: it's completely unlike a contract. Contracts are conditional, limited, and generally entered into for reasons of self-interest. They are legal documents that can be used against you if you violate their terms. Covenants aren't legal, but they are sacred. They can be established between equals, such as two people, or unequals, such as God and God's people. And they are unconditional: if one party fails to follow through, the covenant remains in place. There's no statute of limitations. A contract is to covenant as ink is to blood.

The first covenant is initiated by God after the flood. God promises never to do such a thing again. Noah, for his part, is supposed to keep kosher (more or less; it's a thing about blood and meat) and to get cracking on the baby making. The first covenant is sealed with a rainbow—which, along with all the zebra and turtle and rabbit pairs, explains why this violent, disturbing tale is often deemed appropriate for toddlers. A series of covenants follows, by which God identifies, blesses, and sets the chosen people apart. They come with steep and often bewildering expectations—have you read Leviticus?—but are always rooted in relationship. God is undeniably smitten with the descendants of Abraham. God wants this one to last, you know? As Jeremiah puts it, "They will be my people, and I will be their God."

The amazing—and painful—thing is that by the time Jeremiah passes along this beautiful word of the Lord, God's beloved people have been totally and repeatedly screwing up for ages. They sin, and sin, and sin some more. And with a covenant in place, a sin isn't merely a violation of the law. It's



a betrayal of the relationship; it's personal. The Israelites are being unfaithful.

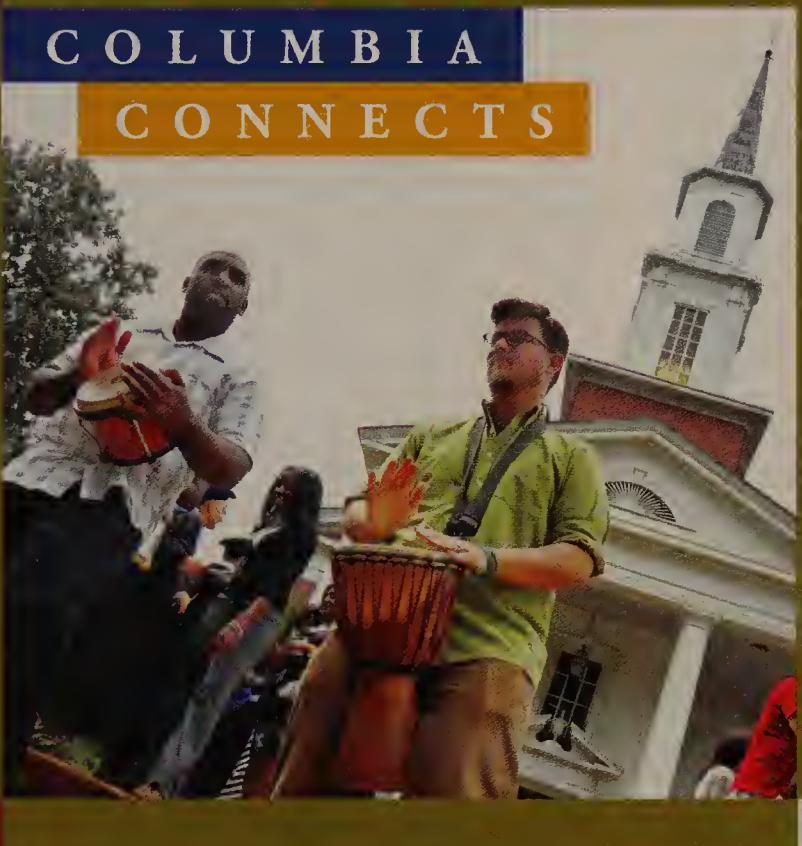
**A**t the beginning of the book of Hosea, God says to the prophet, "Go, take for yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the Lord." Yes, the prophetic allegory employs some gender dynamics that are a tiny bit problematic. But the language of Hosea, with its sheer ferocity, also conveys the ravaging consequences of unfaithfulness. One does not use the word *whoredom* thrice in one sentence if one is not in extreme emotional pain.

Despite marrying Hosea and bearing his children, Gomer wanders. She cheats on her husband. She is the prodigal wife, disregarding the covenant of marriage by committing adultery. At one point she sells herself into slavery, but even then God tells Hosea to extend mercy to her yet again by buying her back. Hosea loves and forgives his "wife of whoredom." God loves and forgives God's spiritually promiscuous people who trample on the covenant that is supposed to bind them to God and to one another, over and over and over again. God is merciful to an agonizing degree.

Dear God, I don't want to be Gomer. I don't want my marriage to be like that. I want to honor all the covenants that govern my life: marriage, yes, but also baptism and ordination. I don't want to sin against the ones I love.

Sometimes I wonder why we are surprised that so many marriages end in discarded vows and broken covenants. Humans are, it would seem, highly susceptible to infidelity. Yet there are vows that are cherished and covenants that are kept,

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and the consequence of mutual fidelity is a life steeped in blessings.

**N**ot long ago, my church celebrated the 60th anniversary of our beloved associate minister's ordination. With a great deal of pomp and circumstance, we sent him forth into his well-deserved retirement. There were trumpets and breathtaking handmade gifts and original songs (20 new verses to "For the Beauty of the Earth," each praising God for

## Covenants are sacred and unconditional.

the various, sundry, and abundant gifts of Paul and his wife; no, we didn't sing them all, but we sang a whole lot). Paul preached his final sermon, "A Last and Lasting Word," which pointed not to his words but to the enduring word of God. Then the congregation stood and applauded until our palms stung.

I feel extremely lucky to have served alongside Paul during the last years of his ministry. He is an old-school pastor (in all the best ways), a modern mystic, and a wildly funny jokester. But what strikes me as most remarkable is his fidelity, what Eugene Peterson would call his "long obedience in the same

direction." Paul has spent his life fulfilling the ordination vows he made when he was 25, as well as the marriage vows he exchanged with his wife three years earlier. His life is a brilliant, shining example of the beauty of covenant. Whenever a community celebrates a big anniversary—of a wedding or an ordination, and others, I'm sure—it is a lovely reminder that the grandiose promises one makes in one's youth can bear out, and bear fruit.

A "long obedience in the same direction" has its stretches marked by the strain of toil and the fret of care, but it also has its glorious mountaintop vistas and the camaraderie of good company. And sometimes—if you so happen to land in a place that knows how to party—a three-piece band playing Dixieland jazz sets up shop outside the sanctuary to fete you as you make your way to the fellowship hall to greet hundreds of people who love you because you have loved them so very, very well. If you ask me, nothing says "well done, good and faithful servant" like a tuba, a clarinet, and a banjo.

On our way out, after the gifts had been given and the tear-streaked cheeks had been kissed, I danced with my daughters by the bandstand while Benjamin shook his head and laughed. I pretended they were goading me to dance, but it was really the other way around. I wanted to savor this moment that was not our moment but had graciously become one of the moments in my own joyfully covenanted life, my own long obedience in the same direction. CC

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Blessings from a special-needs child

# A place for Camille

by Jason D. Whitt

IN JUNE 2009, after eight months of routine pregnancy, a sonogram revealed that my wife's amniotic fluid was low, requiring doctors to perform a C-section and bring our daughter Camille into the world. We were assured that the baby was fine, but then, within 24 hours of her birth, we learned that she had breathing difficulties, was smaller than expected (3 lbs., 10 oz.), and needed to be taken to another hospital.

Thus began a four-week nightmare of traveling 45 minutes each way from our home in Waco to the neonatal intensive care unit at Scott and White Hospital in Temple, Texas. We soon discovered the horror of the NICU for parents. Physicians who work in the NICU do not see "normal" children and don't assume "normalcy." They assume *problems* and are on a constant search to discover them. While this pursuit is medically responsible (there is a reason that a child is in the NICU, after

## Church families and leaders drew us out of a painful isolation.

all), my wife and I found ourselves inwardly and sometimes outwardly pleading, "Please, can't she just be who she is? Must we assume the worst?"

Each visit brought a new concern from her doctors. We'd hear: "Her head is too small." "Her fingers are too long." "Are her ears rotated just a little too much?" "Is one eye lower than the other?" "We need to do an MRI." "Her kidneys worry us." Guessing what they might posit next filled us with dread.

We weren't ready to be parents to a special-needs child—that was a club to which other people belonged. This was early in our journey with Camille, and we needed simply to be her parents—to love her as the beautiful child we saw. Wrestling with special needs and genetic syndromes was not something we could comprehend.

But over the coming months we slowly accepted Camille's condition. When Camille missed developmental milestones we began to acknowledge that she would not be like other children. We became open to genetic testing, moving from not wanting to hear anything into a compulsion to find answers. One geneticist sanctimoniously called it our "diagnostic odyssey."

What we discovered is that Camille is a mystery. Her doctors are convinced that she has a genetic syndrome, but all tests came back negative. She seems to be one of only a handful of people in the world with her condition. She is profoundly intellectually disabled and will never talk, walk, or eat on her own.

Parents of special-needs children are confronted with a future that seems both ominous and cut off from them. They also confront painful isolation. For us it began with the stark realization that all the dreams we had for our daughter had vanished. There would be no first step, no ballet or golf, no first date, no graduation, and no walk down the aisle. The birth of a special-needs child is experienced first as tragedy. Parents are at a time of life that's supposed to be joyous but are instead grieving a future that seems like a nightmare. How can a parent express these feelings to another without appearing cold and heartless? Often parents are cut off from others because parents of typical children can't understand the challenges and fears these parents experience.

Parents like us know that trips out with the family draw attention. We become accustomed to the stares, but life in a fishbowl is isolating. Even when a family musters the courage to walk proudly through a store with their child, they stand out as boldly defying cultural norms as they bravely ignore stares. Other families are simply there, enjoying the solidarity of the American pastime of shopping.

Special-needs families also find themselves isolated in a privileged status that's given to them by well-meaning but misguided fellow Christians. Every special-needs parent I've spoken with has heard, "I couldn't do what you're doing. You are such special people. God chose you because he knew you could handle it." We've heard this more times than we care to remember, and we always bristle at the statement. Special-needs parents don't want the pedestal. These statements imply that we never have a bad day or moments of bad parenting, frustration, or breaking down in tears.

When someone declares us "special," he or she is suggesting that there is an alternative—that it would be acceptable to refuse to receive our child. As Christians my wife and I do not believe this. Instead, we believe that we are called to love and care for the

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Jason D. Whitt is associate director of the Institute for Faith and Learning at Baylor University and a member of Dayspring Baptist Church in Waco, Texas.

children God gives us. There is nothing extraordinary about this. We don't want to be held up as superparents or heroes for loving our children; we want to be recognized as *parents*.

**A**s they do for any family at our church who has a newborn, church members coordinated and brought over meals twice a week. For most families the meals might be delivered for a few weeks. We received them for months and finally had to request that they stop. Our congregation wanted to support us, and the most tangible way to do that was to offer food.

I realize now that it wasn't about the meals. Bringing food was a way for our congregation to celebrate Camille's birth. As I noted earlier, many parents experience the birth of a special-needs child as tragedy, and celebration rarely is part of the family's first days together. Yet our church was willing to go through the actions of celebration. They rejoiced for us even as we struggled to make sense of a world that had turned over.

The birth of a special-needs child is initially experienced as tragedy. Parents grieve lost dreams, dread an unimagined future, and are frustrated by a new world that they never imagined. Yet for most families the grief is transformed into an experience of great joy and blessing. Families begin to recognize that they might not have the child they imagined, but the child they have becomes a source of joy and deep love. We missed celebrating Camille's birth, but we don't miss any opportunity to celebrate and rejoice in the little girl that she is now.

As important as the meals were, we could have easily slipped back into isolation if that had been the end of our church's outreach to us. Thankfully, a church family that we only knew in passing drew us out. Rachel Craig called us with an open invitation: we were welcome at their house for dinner every Tuesday night—no strings attached. If we needed to eat and run, that was fine. If we wanted to eat and stay, we were welcome to do so. The boys could play (the Craigs have young boys close to our son's age).

For the next year and a half we spent almost every Tuesday evening at the Craigs' house. Two other families were also regulars. At those meals we found much-needed community. Tuesday evenings were a space where Camille wasn't different. She was loved and embraced by everyone there. When we arrived someone would hold her so we could eat and have adult conversation. With the families that encircled us we could share frustrations and fears as well as joys and hopes.

Conversations didn't have to remain safe and superficial. We breathed deeply and let down the walls that we'd erected to protect ourselves from the perceived judgments and evaluation of our parenting efforts.

Then our church began to work to create space for Camille. We belong to a smaller church that doesn't have a dedicated special-needs ministry. When Camille was a baby it was natural for her to be with other infants in the nursery. The workers listened carefully as we explained what she could and couldn't do, as well as the best ways to hold her and engage her. Each Sunday morning they welcomed Camille; they never suggest-

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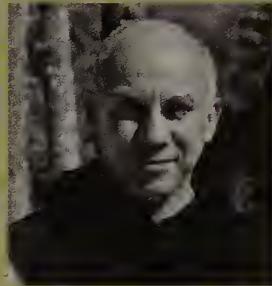
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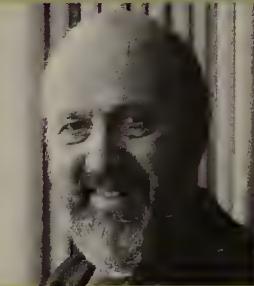
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ed that she was in any way a burden and were genuinely excited by her presence.

When Camille grew too big for the baby room we were concerned. Other children her age were walking, but since she couldn't we feared that she wouldn't fit in with other toddlers. But the volunteers encouraged us to bring her, and although she stayed in her stroller she was included in activities. Despite the fact that she couldn't use her hands to create it, Camille had her own work to take home just like the other kids. Each week one of her teachers completed the class activity and put

## Special-needs parents don't want the pedestal.

Camille's name on it so that we knew she was an important part of the class.

The pattern has held as she's graduated to older classes. Camille enjoys her time in Sunday school, and the other children see her as a part of the class. One Sunday I came in and saw a three-year-old talking to the teacher while unconsciously resting her hand on Camille's leg. It was clear that this little girl regarded Camille as her friend and was showing her affection by simple touch. Even as boundaries are broken for our family in these acts, more boundaries come down for other children and adults as they learn to embrace a special-needs child.

Our church has also recognized our needs during worship. The children's area is crowded during the worship hour, and my wife and I felt that it was a burden to leave Camille (with her large stroller) there during worship. So we either missed worship or sat with Camille in the narthex, trying to listen to the service through speakers.

To draw us out of our exile, our children's minister began a group known as Camille's Companions. Each Sunday a volunteer sits with Camille in the narthex so my wife and I can take our son into the service. Sometimes these companions bring their own children to sit with them.

After services we find a group of teenagers gathered around Camille talking to her and holding her hands. These are children of Camille's Companions who have come to know Camille and see themselves as her friends. Again, what was done as a means of meeting one of our needs has transformed how the teenagers and adults in our church perceive those with disabilities. By looking for ways to make a place for Camille and

offer community to our family, our church is discovering that Camille offers gifts back to the body.

Community is important for our family. We need community to embrace us and draw us out of our lives into the larger church family. My wife and I need it. Our son needs it. Camille needs it.

We've also learned that our church needs Camille. Too often well-meaning followers of Christ see those with disabilities, particularly children and adults with intellectual disabilities, as objects of care. Able-bodied Christians determine to care for "the least of these." Rarely are those with disabilities seen as persons with spiritual gifts who have something to offer and from whom other believers might learn—it's easier to give to those with disabilities than to receive from them. Yet Camille has shown that she is ready to share her gift of joy. Her companions say that it's impossible to be sad around her, and some add that their time with her is the best hour of their week.

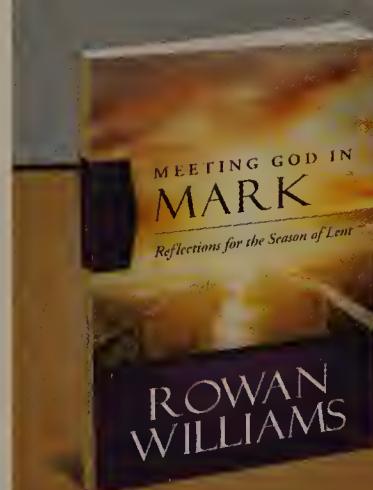
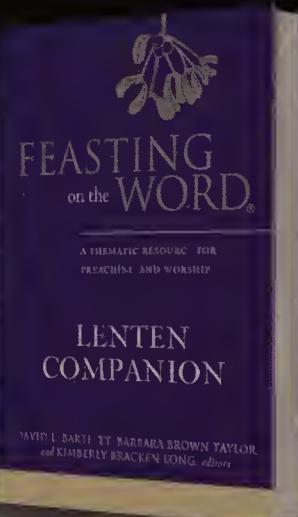
We're not the only family with a special-needs child who is hungry for community, but other families may not know what that community might look like. Our churches must become places where they find welcome and an embrace that breaks down their isolation. Our congregations need this too. When we fail to bring families and their children with disabilities into the life of the church, the church misses out on gifts that the whole community needs.

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Writer Claire Hajaj

# Between two worlds

**CLAIRE HAJAJ** grew up as the daughter of a Palestinian father and a Jewish mother. She has lived in rural England and in the Middle East. She has worked for the United Nations in conflict zones all over the world, from Bosnia to Baghdad, most recently as a consultant on Syrian refugees in Lebanon. A former journalist for the BBC World Service, Hajaj recently published the novel *Ishmael's Oranges*, which follows her parents' own story.

**Your novel *Ishmael's Oranges* stays very close to the facts of your parents' upbringings and marriage. Why did you decide to write a novel and not a memoir?**

When you are writing about people who are still living and whom you love and whose views are very opposing, it is hard to be brave enough to write a memoir.

Fiction has that wonderful capacity to create empathy. I wanted Jews who were reading the book to enter into the experience of someone growing up as a Palestinian boy. And I wanted Palestinians and Arabs who might read the book to imagine what it would be like to grow up as a Jewish child, either during the pogroms or in the protected environment of the United Kingdom. You can't really achieve that with non-fiction; it is too didactic. But with fiction, you can conjure emotions.

**What kind of responses has the book received?**

I had been working on the book for more than seven years. It came out this past summer during the very week that the renewed conflict in Gaza kicked off. I've lived in the Middle East for a very long time, and I've seen a lot of Gazas, but this came so suddenly. It felt like a gladiator event where the whole world was cheering on their particular champion to greater and greater excesses. This was a difficult time to release a book that tries to get people to empathize with a viewpoint other than their own. This was not an easy time for my family.

Many of my colleagues at the UN have lived and worked in the occupied territories, and they have deep feelings about what are truly nightmare living conditions for many Palestinians. To put out a book that showed sympathy and understanding for a Jewish perspective, when some of my colleagues were sitting in Gaza with bombs falling on their heads, was difficult.

But at the end of one particularly difficult day in which I



PHOTO BY JOE SAADE

had been insulted by a number of people who had decided for whatever reason that they hated what I stood for, when I had been dealing with the embarrassment and even shame of my family in being associated with me, I received a review from a Palestinian man. He said that in this book he had seen his own

**"I understood both Palestinians and Jews—and I didn't understand them at all."**

story and had been able to feel the story of the others. He wished that this book could be taught in schools and that both Jewish and Palestinian children could read it because it would save them a lot of grief.

**In the novel, you move back and forth between these two families who have very different realities. Was one side more difficult for you to inhabit than the other?**

Two things about my own life became clear: one was that I really did understand both sides and the other was that I didn't understand them at all. I approached them both as a kind of outsider. It was like hearing a familiar song that you know you've heard all your life—then you are asked to stand up and sing it by yourself, and you realize that you can't remember any of the words.

I would switch between the two families like two channels: Ramadan in East London and then Yom Kippur in Regent's Park. Two very different ways of looking at the world. I knew them both, and yet I didn't belong fully to either one.

The hardest part to inhabit was the broader story of these two peoples. I have a large family on both sides, and I had heard a lot of stories, but I wanted to have a perspective that my family members didn't have. Growing up the way both sides did, it was almost like there was a black sheet thrown over history and then holes cut in the sheet so that only certain

## "You can't really elicit empathy through nonfiction; it is too didactic."

things were visible. I needed to be able to see what was outside, so that I could show the reader their perspectives, but also why they were necessarily narrow. Not that their perspectives weren't true, but that they were limited. It is surprisingly difficult to gain that perspective.

### How does your work for the UN connect to your novel?

I have worked in a lot of conflicted environments: Iraq, Kosovo, Pakistan. Lebanon is now very much on the brink. And what I have seen is that all conflicts are the same, even though they are all different. We are all struggling with contested histories, and we all believe that ours is the only perspective. The struggle to define our identities while we are away from the places we came from is a common reality not just for the Arabs and the Jews. That gives me perspective on the work that I do with displaced Syrians in Lebanon as well as on the stories I tell in the novel.

### Does the neighborhood of the Middle East look more frightening to you now than at any other time in your life?

I don't think so. As I come to understand the Middle East more, I am moved by the extraordinary resilience of the society. As a woman with a child now, rather than a young girl running away from a heritage she didn't really want, I feel akin to the people here in a way that I did not before.

I don't believe that this is a really defining moment for this region. I don't think that we will be sitting here in ten years' time talking about ISIS. ISIS is an additional product of the post-9/11 era, but it does not represent the huge paradigm shift that 9/11 itself was. ISIS completed what had been inevitable: the disintegration of Iraq and the powder keg of Syria. ISIS survives because of the huge schisms between the regional powers. But

those schisms are not unhealable. There has never been such a strong motivation to heal them. If we did, we could see the end of ISIS.

In Israel, there was a sense after this summer's events in Gaza of a momentary opportunity. I felt a sense that things had gotten as bad as they could possibly get, and that meant there was a desire on many sides to find a resolution between two very beleaguered peoples. I don't exactly know where that sense went, but I don't know that things are actually bleaker there than they were pre-Gaza.

### Do you see any signs of hope regionally?

If you mean do I see hope in terms of the political process, I couldn't tell you. The political process has to find its moment, and it hasn't.

What I have been inspired by is that there does seem to be momentum within Jewish society and also within Palestinian society that enough is enough. As many people as there were—many of whom had never even been to the region—screaming for blood on either side, there were people from both communities who stood up and said, "Not in my name." They seemed to know that this was not a war between the Jews and the Palestinians, but very much a war between Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Hamas. Both he and Hamas leaders have to take responsibility for what happened as a result of their baiting each other.

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Meanwhile, I have cousins who are Israeli citizens, who speak Hebrew and who live and breathe the drama of being people of Palestinian origin in Israel. But they get on with life. They want to have ordinary lives. I think it is a template for how we might imagine the future, when the political process finds its moment.

### **What would you say to the political leaders if you had the opportunity?**

The political process is so driven in self-interest right now I don't think that anything I or anyone else could say would be very helpful for negotiations to inch forward. But to the people who vote for them, to the people especially who grieved over the summer in the midst of the rage and anger, I wish there could be a pause button between emotion and action.

When you are being bombed, the instinct is to bomb back. And it can seem politically impossible not to do that. The politicians do it to survive. But we the voters, the people who are led by them, we pay. We save their political careers at the expense of our security and the security of our children.

### **Do the religions of the region play any significant roles?**

When it comes to religion, it depends almost entirely on the personalities of the leaders. They can be a great force for good, but in this region, religious leaders have more often taken the

route of mayhem and murder. Religion here is an alternative form of politics. It is not about going to church. It is about having your sect and your stake and fighting a political battle. Religion is very good at providing succor to one's own community. But I don't think you would come to the Middle East and say, "Wow, this is a place that really shows the world what religion can be."

God doesn't come into it in the Middle East. I don't think God has been here in a very long time. I am sure some of my

**"Religion is very good at providing succor to one's own community."**

Muslim friends would disagree with me. But the conflict here is not about what God enjoins us to do. It is about political stakes for our particular tribe and community. Politics, turf, and contested interests.

### **In the book you quote Anwar Sadat, "Peace is more important than land." Is this a statement that you claim for yourself?**

I think Sadat was a remarkable human being. He went to the Knesset and spoke these words, which were the antithesis of everything that Jewish and Palestinian leaders had been saying up to this point. Everyone else had been saying, "We will die for our land." And he was dead not long after. I wanted to look at the bravery of that statement and to look at what peace could bring.

To bring up your children in these refugee camps with the belief that land is more important than peace, that they must never feel at home where they are, that their true home is elsewhere and that they must carry that rage forward because of a land and home they've never known—to me this is tragic. Whether it is right or wrong, justified or unjustified, is not for me to say. Understandable, sure. But tragic.

### **What is peace for you?**

It is not a signature on a piece of paper, no matter who is signing. It is not the turn of a key in an old lock. It is not being able to live behind high walls and not be assailed by any outsider. Peace will come after a bitter process that leaves people so emotionally drained that they can do nothing but coexist. Which is why the biggest opportunity for resolution comes after the biggest conflict.

What I ultimately hope will happen is that there will be a gradual, inevitable moving toward what I think is the most logical solution, a one-state solution. And then perhaps enough time without violence will pass to make concessions that once seemed impossible seem possible. Economic ties are built that outweigh the need to carry political messages through private companies. When this kind of peace process happens, you can look back and say, "That is inevitable," whereas before, it looked impossible.

## **January 26th: the anniversary of my mother's death**

*He is green before the sun,  
And his branch shooteth forth  
In his garden.*

Job 8:16

Today, I am five years older than she was.  
Mom didn't have time to tell me everything.

All my green chairs were my mother's,  
who inherited hers from God knows where.

Because some green chairs never wear out,  
I wish I could know everything about green:

nature's timeless neutral, algae, fir trees,  
grasses, fronds, the peacock's iridescence;

some dragons, most jade, copper's verdigris,  
oil of sage, chrysoprase, and sunset's moment—

the green flash—Yahweh's infinity wand.

**Nola Garrett**

## Why do you say a one-state solution is most logical?

To me countries are like lives: best organized around common humanist principles of tolerance and mutual benefit irrespective of differences of faiths and philosophies. Israel will always be blessed with a Jewish character, but whether it can and should be a "Jewish state" is a different question. When I think of how the future should be shaped, the exact arrangement of flags, anthems, and political power bases are the last things on my mind.

In your book, Salim, the Palestinian father, says to Judith, the Jewish mother, "You can't live in two cultures any more than you can have two hearts." How would you compare Salim's perspective to your own?

He says this at a moment when he and his wife have been living between two cultures for many years. They have children who live in two cultures and more. But Salim has heard this idea from his own family. Whenever you are displaced, you romanticize the place that you come from. There is a diaspora drive to remember who you were and to keep that community tight around you and make your children carry it forward. If you don't do that, you fear you will lose part of yourself.

For Palestinians and Jews, this is more intense because they both have a narrative that feeds on human beings. And every generation of children is offered up to this narrative. There is a feeling that you are betraying your culture if you don't carry it forward. My mother's and father's families are loving families and they would never see it this way: that their children are being sacrificed to their narrative. Nonetheless, this is true.

## What will you tell your own child about her identity?

Growing up standing between different cultures—especially cultures divided over many things—will leave you with a lot of unanswered questions and a lot of self-doubt. But through that self-doubt, you can become a whole person.

Most great religious thinkers have welcomed doubt as a path to becoming an enlightened human being. In this world where so many potential identities are possible—the place where we were born, the place where we grew up, the people we are surrounded by, the people we connect to through these extraordinary new channels—it is not helpful any-

more to say, "I am this way ideologically because of how I was born." It is more difficult and lonelier to shape an identity that is self-formed, but it is essential.

I understand the desperate pain of someone like Salim, who feels that he has a vital legacy to pass on and he is not passing it on as he should. You feel like your life has been a failure. You failed to pass on the ideas that came with your genes. But what a tragedy if your fear destroys your opportunity to create a life for yourself or deprives your children of the opportunity to make something new out of what you have given them. 

—Amy Frykholm

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- a timeline for completion of the research and plan for publication;
- a research budget that includes all sources of funding aid (for doctoral students, this should include information on all scholarships and fellowships received since the beginning of the program).

Doctoral candidates should request a confidential letter from their doctoral advisor and one other graduate faculty.



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## A letter to Thomas Merton

DEAR Father Louis,

The sun has run its course in Aquarius one hundred times since your birth on “the last day of January 1915, under the sign of the Water Bearer, in a year of a great war.” It’s been almost three-quarters of a century since you entered the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani as a postulant, penitent, and convert; you enclosed yourself in its “four walls of freedom” on December 10, 1941, as the United States was entering the Second World War, a month and a half shy of your 27th birthday. You died on December 10, 1968, exactly 27 years later, after delivering a talk on “Marxism and Monastic Perspectives” at a meeting in Bangkok. Your life divides into secular and religious halves; and that is almost the only thing about you that can be neatly sorted out.

I first learned of you during my childhood on the fringe of the peace movement in New York; I remember hearing the complaints of some Catholic Worker activists when you refused to endorse draft card burning during the Vietnam War; you had a way of disconcerting even those who considered you a prophet. During my college years I discovered your books, from your classic memoir, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, to your reflections on Zen, Taoism, and Sufism. You convinced me that the contemplative life remains not only viable but essential. My would-be husband figured he could win me over by keeping a copy of *Contemplative Prayer* in his back pocket; he succeeded. By then you had become what your name anagrammatically suggests, a mentor to millions of people who never had a chance to know you face to face.

But we desire to know you face to face; hence the profusion of notable biographies—among them, the mildly psychoanalytical investigation by Monica Furlong, the Michael Mott biography stuffed to the gills with everyday facts, the sympathetic studies by Lawrence Cunningham and William Shannon, Paul Elie’s group portrait linking you to your fellow American Catholic pilgrims Dorothy Day, Walker Percy, and Flannery O’Connor, the film biography by Paul Wilkes and Audrey Glynn—and the many picture books by Ed Rice, John Howard Griffin, Jim Forest, and others. How photogenic you were in your white habit and black scapular, set against the fields of grass and alfalfa, or in denim work clothes and straw hat on the porch of your hermitage, or, freed from your four walls of freedom, enjoying the company of newfound brothers, Thich Nhat Hanh and the Dalai Lama.

And how inscrutable you were, for all the self-revealing writing. You wrote a memoir worthy of comparison to

Augustine’s *Confessions*—were it not marred by a Holden Caulfield-like *contemptus mundi*. You tapped into the well-springs of monastic spirituality through scholarship and reflection on the Rule of St. Benedict, the Desert Fathers, John Cassian, Bernard of Clairvaux—and then you translated that spirituality into an idiom of authenticity and alienation that now seems dated. You restored contemplation to its rightful centrality in Christian life and did much “to reassure the modern world that in the struggle between thought and existence we [monks] are on the side of existence, not on the side of abstraction”—and then you portrayed contemplation as so radically self-emptying that it sheds much of its specific religious content. You fought for the privilege of living as a hermit on the abbey grounds—but you let your hermitage become a gathering place for your nonmonastic friends during a period when you were (as you told Rosemary Radford Ruether) “browned off with and afraid of Catholics.”

On a reductionist psychoanalytic reading, you were an orphan searching for his lost parents, a repressed lover, and a narcissist drowning in his own reflection. On a more discerning Augustinian reading, though, you were an Everyman whose heart is restless until it rests in God; and on a sound monastic reading, you were one of thousands of essentially good monks who strayed but stayed the course. I believe you did stay the course. Had it not been for the faulty electric fan, or the fault in your own heart, I believe you would have returned to Gethsemani to be a model of monastic wisdom after the storms of youth had passed.

You said that the purpose of monasticism is not survival, but prophecy. What you may not have realized—since your entry into monastic life was the high-water mark of its wartime and postwar revival—is that the survival of monasticism is prophecy, a special kind of prophecy that subdues and outlasts political passions.

*The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* gives your parting words at the Bangkok meeting as “So I will disappear.” Quoted in full, however, your words are without valedictory significance: “So I will disappear, and we can all get a Coke or something.” And so you died, with your story unfinished. But we may piece together from your letters, poems, diaries, novels, tracts, and recordings of your lectures to the Gethsemani scholastics the picture of a brilliant writer, committed monk, and fragile man who searched for God with his whole heart and bids us to do the same.

Pax.

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Carol Zaleski is professor of world religions at Smith College.

## The world slavery made

by Paul Harvey

**T**his book is the opposite of a page-turner. I don't mean that the author fails. On the contrary, Edward Baptist has written one of the richest and most provocative accounts of American slavery I have ever read. He so powerfully captures the pain and tragedy of plantation slavery—of life in what he calls the “slave labor camps”—that I had to force myself to turn each page, fearing yet another punch in the gut. The book is painful to read.

*The Half Has Never Been Told* achieved considerable fame as soon as it was published because of an astonishingly stupid review in the *Economist*—one so bad that the magazine quickly retracted it. The reviewer's basic point was that Baptist portrays all whites as villains (which he doesn't) and all blacks as victims. Imagine that in a book about slavery! A social media storm ensued, led by parodies of the review on Twitter under the hashtag #economistbookreviews. The book quickly shot up in the Amazon book rankings, demonstrating yet again that there is no such thing as bad publicity.

Baptist's big book retells the story of southern history and American history from the ratification of the Constitution to the Civil War. The author brilliantly draws out the close relationship between plantation slavery in the newly opening territories and states of what was then called the Southwest (Kentucky, Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee, and Texas) and the American capitalist explosion of the antebellum years.

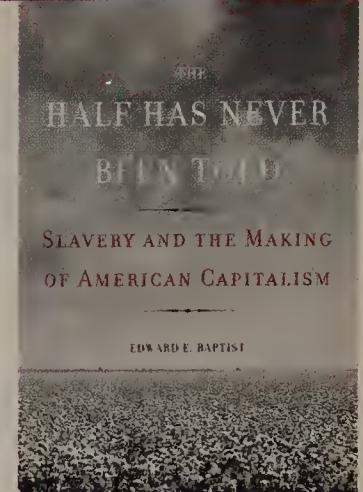
Slavery in cotton country was efficiently and ruthlessly productive, Baptist documents: “The total gain in productivity per picker from 1800 to 1860 was almost 400 percent.” Planters figured out how to get more and more cotton bolls

picked per hand per day, experimenting for years with the perverse incentives of a regime of torture. “We don't usually see torture as a factor of production,” Baptist writes, but we should.

And the system worked. What that meant for the enslavers (a word he always prefers over *slaveholders*) was the possibility of getting fairly rich (and occasionally very rich) fairly quickly. The same animal spirits that drive all economic bubbles powered the one in the newly opening cotton regions, where those animal spirits had free rein to abuse, batter, rape, and break down the bodies of the enslaved.

Few readers other than professional historians know about the massive extent of the internal slave trade in the antebellum years—the buying and selling of slaves from the declining slave economies of the eastern seaboard (primarily in Virginia and North Carolina) to the booming economies of what became the Deep South black belt. From 1790 to 1860, upward of one million black people were taken, stolen, dragged in coffles, bounced in wagons, or placed on ships or steamboats, and carried from one region to another. By contrast, fewer than 400,000 Africans arrived in North America via the transatlantic Middle Passage trade from 1619 to 1808.

The internal slave trade made the antebellum South. Enslaved people did the work that powered approximately half the American economy, Baptist argues. He counts not just the products they grew and picked, but all the ancillary second- and third-order economic support systems for the plantations, such as the production in northern factories of axes that were perfectly made to deforest southern lands in preparation for cot-



### The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism

By Edward E. Baptist  
Basic Books, 528 pp., \$35.00

ton planting. The multiplier effect of slavery was astonishingly effective in producing a boom.

In the most important sections of this work—the best treatment of the subject I have ever seen—Baptist discusses precisely how the slave regime powered the early financial industry in the United States, and the banking system in particular. In one brilliant chapter, he explains in layperson's terms that borrowers secured their mortgages using slaves as collateral. This spread risk and helped to finance the astonishing boom in the Southwest from the early 19th century until the days of reckoning after the Panic of 1837.

Like the financial services industry in the 1990s and 2000s, the planters and bankers of the 1820s and 1830s had learned to privatize gain and socialize risk. They got state governments to guarantee bonds they took out using slave collateral. If their ventures failed, the state would pick up the tab, but if they succeeded, they would get rich.

Baptist draws on his considerable skills of literary re-creation to make the reader feel at least something of what it was like to be enslaved. He employs a huge array of firsthand accounts and cre-

---

Paul Harvey teaches history at the University of Colorado and is coauthor, with Edward J. Blum, of *The Color of Christ: The Son of God and the Saga of Race in America* (University of North Carolina Press).

ates “you are there” scenarios. Some reviewers have complained of Baptist’s fictionalizations, but I see little reason for concern. And I see even less reason to downgrade the book (as some have) for repeated use of the “f” word on a couple of pages. The author is offering a clever etymological exploration of the word and its relevance for this case.

Baptist writes in just about every genre of prose at some point in the book, from the most straightforward and conventional to the most literary and experimental. Readers will respond to particular passages according to their own taste. To me, most of it worked, some of it very impressively.

Religion on the slave frontier receives a fairly short but very good treatment in the middle of the book. “The acceleration of slavery’s expansion,” Baptist writes, “was hell—separation from all that gave life in the world meaning.”

It did not help that after Nat Turner’s rebellion in 1831, white ministers “eagerly promised that they would henceforth work harder than ever to make Christianity into a tool that would help enslavers govern their society.” Whites condemned male slaves for failing to resist heroically, and thus for being unmanly. Baptist counters with a memorable passage about the everyday nonheroic (that is, nonsuicidal) virtues practiced by slaves—moments of community, kindness, and grace as they walked in a world that was hell without fire.

This is not a comprehensive history of American slavery. It is not about slaves in Virginia’s tobacco fields or about Richmond’s industries; about domestic servants or artisans in southern cities; about black cowboys in Texas; or about slave economies and lives outside the boom belt created by southwestern enslavers and their financiers. In the Southwest, though, American slavery could be seen in its raw fullness.

“Slavery permitted unchecked dominance and promised unlimited fulfillment of unrestrained desire,” Baptist writes, and “one cannot understand it without studying both careful calculation and passionate craving.” This book addresses both with an effectiveness achieved by few other authors.

## Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life

By Walter Kasper  
Paulist, 288 pp., \$29.95

**G**od is merciful. This is a biblical commonplace. But *how* God is merciful is a theological conundrum, especially if we conceive of God in metaphysical terms as pure being. Walter Kasper notes in this stimulating book that “God’s mercy has not found its place within this framework.” To ask how one of God’s primary attributes is mercy is to ask profound questions that go to the heart of Christian theology: How does God’s mercy comport with God’s justice? How does God’s mercy affect God’s salvific will? What is the relationship of God’s mercy to the trinitarian revelation of God in the Christian dispensation? Does the fact that God is merciful mean that God suffers, and if so, what about divine impassibility?

Kasper’s original intention was to compose a set of texts about God’s mercy for some retreat conferences. His motive at that time was purely pastoral, and his reflections were largely biblical.

Excellent theologian that he is, however, he found himself meditating on God’s mercy in a far larger context because to think of God as merciful enlarges the way we think about God. Kasper’s contemplation of mercy evolved into a study that is deeply theological but still quite pastoral for at least one important reader, Pope Francis, who found it of enormous value in his own ministry.

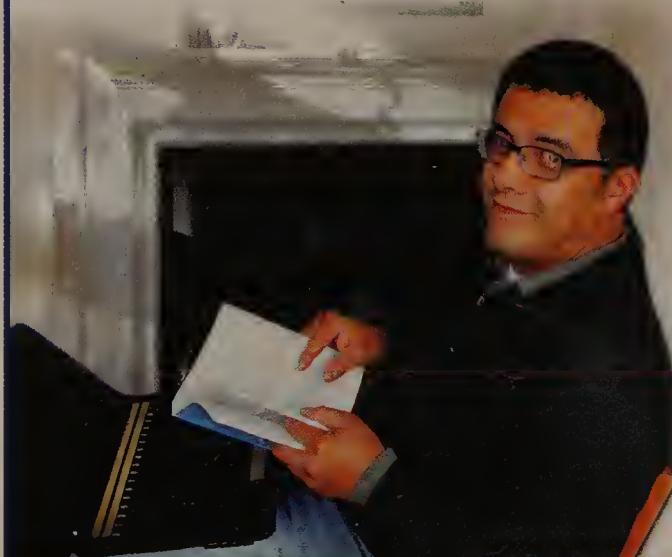
The subtitle of the book sets out its thesis economically: *Mercy* both illuminates the core meaning of the good news and provides the key for Christian living. The first four chapters explore the vocabulary (are mercy and compassion

Reviewed by Lawrence S. Cunningham, *emeritus professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.*



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the same thing? how does mercy differ from empathy? from pity?), then examine the place of mercy in philosophical discourse and in the Old and New Testaments. The next four chapters spell out some systematic reflections (how does mercy relate to justice? what does this mean for the possibility of salvation for all?), discuss the relation of mercy to the great commandment to love God and neighbor, and consider how the

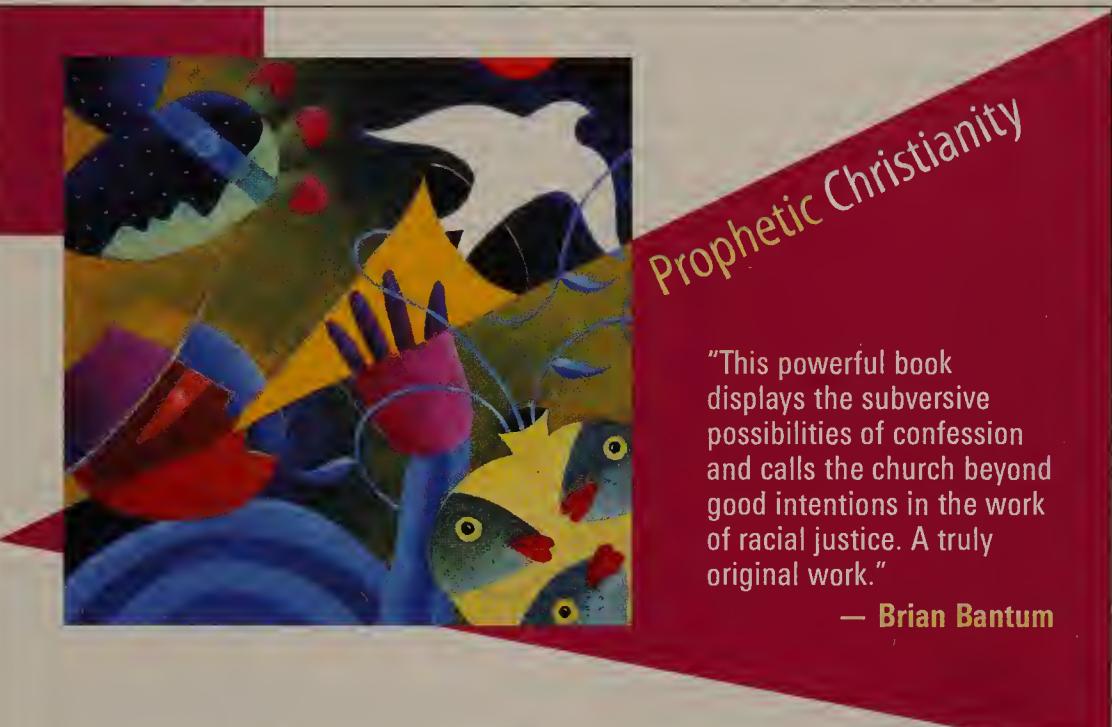
church is measured by mercy. The final chapter offers a rich meditation on the culture of mercy, with a reflection on the theme of the Blessed Virgin as “Mother of Mercy.”

Mercy is such a well-worn word in our Christian vocabulary—how often do we cry out in the liturgy, “Lord, have mercy”—that it is only when a sensitive theologian like Kasper brings the word to the forefront that we begin to under-

stand its profound implications. Kasper’s work sheds a good deal of light on Pope Francis’s pastoral emphases. It helps us understand, for example, why the pope is anxious to explore the question of eucharistic participation of divorced and remarried Catholics and why he not only condemns the death penalty but cries out against perpetual incarceration. It is not accidental that a collection of the pope’s public addresses has appeared in the United States under the title *The Church of Mercy*.

Kasper contends that *mercy* is a neglected and understudied term in the Christian vocabulary. It is one of those words that is part of our common language but whose profundity we have not grasped. Furthermore, it is a word that, on first mention, seems weak and overly malleable. Tough-minded people—Nietzsche comes to mind—scorn it for its mildness as contrasted with the stern demand for justice. Too often mercy has been the privilege of the mighty, who might throw it as a bone to people who deserve stiffer consequences.

Kasper has provided a model of *ressourcement* theology by retrieving a primordial biblical term, detecting its deep traditional meaning, and putting it into conversation with exigent issues facing church and society. Like the good householder, Kasper has brought forth both old things and new.



## Dear White Christians For Those Still Longing for Racial Reconciliation

Jennifer Harvey

“This book calls for nothing less than laying down the trump card of reconciliation for the sake of true repentance and conversion. Jennifer Harvey is proclaiming truth. Listen to her.”

— Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove

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## Faith Speaking Understanding: Performing the Drama of Doctrine

By Kevin J. Vanhoozer  
Westminster John Knox, 298 pp.,  
\$30.00 paperback

The Christian faith is known, shared, and validated in its performance. The church exists not simply to guard or preserve orthodox doctrine but also to enact, embody, and incarnate doctrine. Kevin Vanhoozer, an experienced, highly regarded practical theologian, engagingly argues for the performance of Christian doctrine in *Faith Speaking Understanding*.

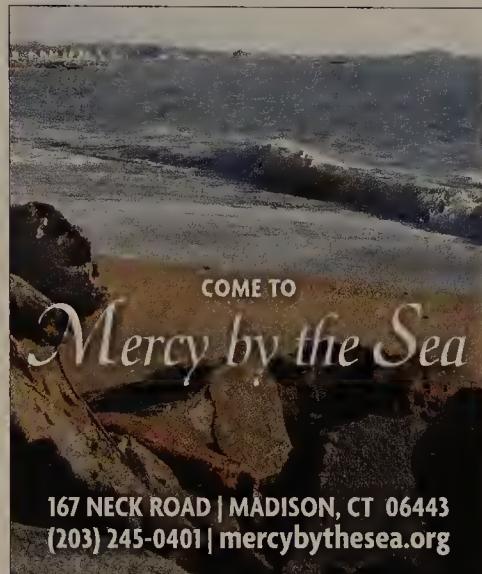
"Theology is the serious and joyful attempt to live blessedly with others, before God, in Christ, through the Spirit," Vanhoozer writes. The book is his comprehensive call for Christians to actively join in "what God has done, is doing, and will do in Christ through the Spirit." We can't do church without doing doctrine, he contends; it's not enough to correctly explain what we believe without living out those beliefs. Vanhoozer encourages lively engagement with and demonstration of the truth of our faith and offers criteria for knowing when we have succeeded in taking up our parts as actors in the divine/human drama that is Christ's redemption of the world.

Vanhoozer's deep affection for the thought of the church is infectious and refreshing in an age that values a host of other things more than good thinking. A major strength of his book is its strong affirmation of the importance of church as more than a mere set of practices, with a concomitant downplay of the importance of beliefs and ideas. Some present Christianity as a culture in which convictions are not as significant as habits and general worldview. But Vanhoozer shows that one of the joys of the Christian faith is that we don't have to make it up as we go; the saints can help us think our way toward discipleship as God means it to be. And what we think about God is decisive. We'll never pull ourselves out of

the morass of subjectivity and expressive individualism without some help from those who thought about the faith more deeply than we're thinking now.

At the same time, Vanhoozer demonstrates that Christian thinking is a considerably more engaging, embodied affair than much that passes for thinking these days. Christians challenge the world's ways of thought by doing what we know,

by displaying lives and local churches that show the world something more than the world can produce by its philosophies, schemes, and political programs. The truth that is Jesus Christ is meant to be not only intellectually affirmed but also lived. As Augustine said in *On Christian Doctrine*, faithful scriptural interpretation does two things: it discovers what we need to learn, then "presents what we have learnt."



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Reviewed by William H. Willimon, who teaches  
the practice of Christian ministry at Duke  
Divinity School.

Vanhoozer uses Kierkegaard's analogy of the church as actors on the stage of the drama of salvation rather than a passive audience watching God perform. The gospel is a grand pageant performed by the Trinity, in which ordinary people are pushed onstage and given roles to play that we couldn't have thought up ourselves. By the grace of God we are given not only the words to say but also the courage to overcome our stage fright. The Holy Spirit, says Vanhoozer, is the drama's Director, Enabler, and Prompter.

Vanhoozer makes good use of Sam Wells's *Improvisation*, extending and amplifying that improvisational depiction of Christian ethics. I found quite challenging his critique of mere *story* as a word to characterize the gospel. *Drama* is a more active, more involving way of telling and showing the good news of Jesus Christ. As a preacher I underlined Vanhoozer's argument that there's a difference between how one tells a story as a mode of discourse and how one presents the story as a drama.

My one disappointment with *Faith Speaking Understanding* is that Vanhoozer does not look at more specific doctrines through his lens of theodrama. After he makes his point that drama is to be performed, the book begins to feel redundant. I would have liked to see more doctrine displayed and less reiteration of the insights of performance theory. He takes an insightful look at hospitality (is that a doctrine or a practice?), and his discussion of the sacraments is rich. But what might it mean to turn the doctrine of reconciliation into drama?

I'm surrounded by pastors who tell me that they are leading incarnational ministry, but I can't tell for sure just how they are attempting to embody Christ's incarnation—or whether we should even try such a thing.

I also think it would have been instructive for Vanhoozer to give us some examples of plays or movies that are good secular enactments of the dramatic dynamic he is advocating. I recently attended an incredible performance of *Twelfth Night*. While I read *Faith Speaking Understanding*, I constantly thought of the peculiar power of that play and the way those actors drew the audience into the performance.

Vanhoozer closes with a fine excursus on the historic Christian prejudice against the theater and actors; the church knew its stiffest competition when it saw it. Vanhoozer clearly thinks the church has a better play than what's now on Broadway. Let's get on stage, bring up the curtain, lose ourselves in the outrageous roles given to us by Christ, and sing and dance our hearts out before a disbelieving world.

Yesterday a layperson told me that she had taken up a challenge that I issued in my sermon last month. She was now attempting to share her faith with a Muslim coworker in her office. I thought not only of what a great preacher I can be with some help from the Holy Spirit, but also of Vanhoozer's book. "What the church indwells and performs is not the script per se but rather the past, present, and future theodrama that the script transcribes, describes, and prescribes and anticipates."

## The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History

By Elizabeth Kolbert

Henry Holt, 336 pp., \$28.00

We broke this world. We did this," declares Noah, played by Russell Crowe in Darren Aronofsky's recent film. The title character discerns that the God-ordained purpose of his family is to liberate plants and animals from the horrors of human beings. "Our family has been chosen for a great task," he says to his son Shem. "We've been chosen to save the innocent, . . . the animals." And in the film, for Noah, the salvation of the world involves the annihilation of the human beings: Noah's children are three boys; the human species will come to end. Noah tells his family as the rain begins, "If we were to inherit the world again, it would only be to destroy it once more." To his youngest son he says, "You, Japheth, will be the last man. . . . The creation will be left alone, safe and beautiful."

In the film, Noah hears about this apocalypse from God, but we can read about it in Elizabeth Kolbert's *The Sixth Extinction*. To demonstrate how *Homo sapiens* has made a wreckage of the earth and sky, Kolbert introduces us to a chorus of scientists who show us evidence of the earth's convulsions everywhere, from coral reefs near Australia to the population of bats in upstate New York. Her book is full of notes on the end of the world—at least the end of the world for human beings. The earth has survived mass extinctions before, and the earth will endure without us.

Kolbert contends that human beings have inaugurated the sixth in a series of planetary extinction events, the first being the global freezing phenomenon that marked the end of the Ordovician period 450 million years ago, and the most recent being the asteroid that ended the Cretaceous period 65 million years ago. The sixth extinction, she says, will end what the chemist Paul Crutzen has called "the Anthropocene," this "human-dominated, geological epoch" during which human settlements have altered more than half of the earth's sur-

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face and anthropogenic emissions have modified the atmosphere.

"Owing to a combination of fossil fuel combustion and deforestation," Kolbert explains, "the concentration of carbon dioxide in the air has risen by forty percent over the last two centuries, while the concentration of methane, an even more potent greenhouse gas, has more than doubled." Human beings have restructured the planet in a short amount of time in terms of the evolutionary clock. The rate of change matters because flora and fauna need time to adapt in order to survive. Kolbert draws an analogy with alcohol consumption: "Just as it makes a big difference to your blood chemistry whether you take a month to go through a six-pack or an hour, it makes a big difference . . . whether carbon dioxide is added over the course of a million years or a hundred."

Of course, not all plants and animals are suffering in the Anthropocene. As human beings continue to recompose the earth, "some species will thrive," Kolbert observes. The earth will go on, even after we succeed in suffocating our own species with toxic air. Kolbert's realism is striking, especially as we hear experts and activists plead for an abrupt halt to ecological destruction to save the world from catastrophe. For Kolbert, the catastrophe has already begun, and there's no undoing it.

Kolbert insists that "man was a killer . . . pretty much from the start." There's no room for romantic notions of peaceable human coexistence with the rest of nature. The emergence of human life has been a protracted extinction event. "Our restlessness, our creativity," Kolbert writes, our insatiable desire to stretch "beyond the limits of [our] world" are part of the human condition. We overreach, we take what we don't need, we are slaves to habits of greedy consumption. Call it our original sin: a constitutive dissatisfaction that compels us to gobble up what we shouldn't, to devour what we needn't—*forbidden fruit*. "This capacity predates modernity," she notices, "though, of course, modernity is its fullest expression."

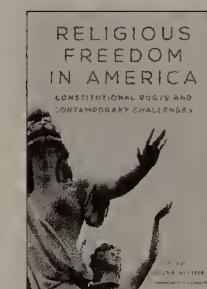
Reviewed by Isaac S. Villegas, pastor of Chapel Hill Mennonite Fellowship in North Carolina.

*The Sixth Extinction* exposes the irony of the name *Homo sapiens*. We named ourselves wise and knowledgeable—*sapere*, a Latin word meaning "to know" or "to discern," a word that has everything to do with exercising wisdom and making sensible decisions. Yet here we are, panicked because we've created the conditions of our own extinction. Kolbert quotes the ecologist Paul Ehrlich to this effect: "In pushing other species to extinction, humanity is busy sawing off the limb on which it perches." The human story, according to Kolbert, reads like an ancient Greek tragedy. In the penultimate scene of the play, we finally figure out that we were the ones who set in motion the processes of our own death, and it cannot be undone. All that's left is to determine which other species we'll be taking down into the soil with us, where together our fossilized remains will mark yet another apocalyptic end to an epoch.

We will leave a living legacy as well. On page after page, Kolbert documents people who have given themselves to sustaining other forms of life—from conservationists in Panama who work to preserve the habitats of endangered frogs, to biologists in Brazil who are trying to protect plots of megadiversity in the state of Amazonas. She tells a story of an animal reproductive physiologist who tries repeatedly and without success to artificially inseminate a Sumatran rhino named Suci at the Cincinnati Zoo. It is an attempt to continue the 20 mil-

lion year lineage of a rhino species, a creature E. O. Wilson has called a "living fossil." And there's the doctor at the San Diego Zoo whose work involves stimulating the gonads of a Hawaiian crow named Kinohi—one of only a hundred left in the world, all in captivity. Three times a week, the doctor strokes the sexual organ of the bird in order to produce ejaculate that is rushed to a zoo on Maui for an insemination procedure on a female Hawaiian crow. This "tragicomic sex provides more evidence—if any more was needed—of how seriously humans take extinction," Kolbert comments. "Such is the pain the loss of a single species causes that we're willing to perform ultrasounds on rhinos and handjobs on crows."

Millions of years after our extinction, perhaps a species of sentient beings will emerge from the postapocalyptic milieu and discover these stories and know that at least some of us loved and cared for our neighbors, even our nonhuman ones.



## RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN AMERICA

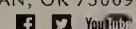
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## Visions of Amen: The Early Life and Music of Olivier Messiaen

By Stephen Schloesser  
Eerdman's, 594 pp., \$50.00

**A**part from the exceptional figure of Johann Sebastian Bach, probably no Western composer of stature has been so thoroughly correlated with a nuanced Christian theology as has the French modernist Olivier Messiaen (1908–1992). But whereas many would read Bach's extraordinary musical accomplishment as expressive of his Lutheran culture, Messiaen's work appears to be not in solidarity with but in opposition to his own culture: the cynical secularism of the 20th-century avant-garde.

As we have learned from much probing scholarship since Messiaen's death, this image of a Christian composer singled out from the pack is the one he carefully fashioned for himself. According to his own narrative, Messiaen was not raised in the doctrines of the Catholic faith but rather was "born a believer," destined on his path as a "musician of joy." This unlikely Delphic persona—the pious church organist with

a groundbreaking musical language motivated by the complexities of Catholic doctrine, from whose Parisian classroom nevertheless issued some of the most iconoclastic composers of secular modernism—is the Messiaen deconstructed by an impressive corpus of recent work.

That corpus has once again expanded with Stephen Schloesser's *Visions of Amen*, at 594 pages the heftiest single-author study of the composer in English. Significantly, Schloesser's field is not music but modern European history, which he teaches at Loyola University Chicago. His previous monograph on Parisian Catholic culture between the world wars (*Jazz Age Catholicism*, published in 2005) informs the newer work. A consideration of Messiaen's person and music through the lens of a broad-based cultural history is both fitting and welcome.

Schloesser builds his book around a detailed examination of Messiaen's seven-movement *Visions of Amen* for two pianos (1943), which, Schloesser argues, "offers a convenient end point for this first epoch in Messiaen's life." The reader can listen to a performance of the piece by the pianists Hyesook Kim and Stéphane Lemelin, downloadable

without cost from a URL cited in the book; the recording corresponds to a formal analysis of each movement that Schloesser includes as an appendix.

The author is careful to condition his approach for a wide readership: he minimizes musical-technical terminology, and the intricacies of Messiaen's tonal language take a backseat to contextual analysis. Accordingly, Schloesser allows the music to dialogue intimately with aspects of the composer's biography, and he considers how Messiaen's disparate interests—Catholic doctrine, ancient and modern literature, metaphysics, currents of surrealism and symbolism, ornithology, astronomy, Eastern music and religions, and many more—express themselves in his music.

But the book is about a great deal more than the position of a single work in the composer's oeuvre. In fact one might argue that this study tries to do too many things simultaneously. The subtitle is right only in a limited sense: certainly, the nine chapters that precede the discussion of *Visions* offer original and sometimes piercing analyses of the composer's par-

Reviewed by Christopher Anderson, associate professor of sacred music at Southern Methodist University, Dallas.

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ents, his conflicted homelife as a child, the remarkable nexus of his formative influences, and the personal tragedies he absorbed, all in counterpoint with his compositions through the early 1940s. But three final chapters consider the music from this point through the end of the composer's life, admittedly in a more cursory though no less insightful manner.

In the final three chapters Schloesser suggests that Messiaen's later music revisits the thematic concerns of earlier works. For instance, he contends that Messiaen's last organ work, the monumental *Book of the Blessed Sacrament* (1984), represents a return to and expansion of the theological concerns of his first piece for organ, *The Celestial Banquet* (1928).

In the book's earlier sections Schloesser shows how Messiaen's music of the 1920s and '30s points to works of later decades: the organ cycle *The Nativity of the Lord* (1935), for example, shares with the oratorio *The Transfiguration* (1969) the doctrine of divine adoption as its theological center.

Despite the title, Schloesser's accomplishment does not have to do primarily with the close-up examinations of Messiaen's formative years and his *Visions* cycle. He advances a decidedly holistic portrait of the composer, whose consistent emphasis on the transcendent joy of divine truth was motivated by, among other things, a sense of impermanence and profound grief in his lived experience.

As Schloesser's narrative demonstrates, Messiaen's encounter with tragedy extended beyond family losses during the Great War and his own imprisonment during World War II to include the three women in his life. His mother, the poet Cécile Sauvage, overwhelmed by depression and frail health, died in 1927 when the composer was not yet 20. His first wife, the violinist and composer Claire Delbos, whose courtship with and marriage to Messiaen ensued in the midst of the composer's "grief works," suffered an agonizing mental decline and long institutionalization until her death in 1959. His intro-

duction to his second wife, the pianist Yvonne Loriod, overlapped the difficult period of Claire's deterioration. The music's thematic substance takes on a fascinating texture when considered against this dynamic of love, loss, and love regained.

No one will accuse Schloesser of being laconic. Readers are confronted with a formidable apparatus of source citations, footnoted commentaries, and explorations of contemporary thought that lop deftly from Henri Bergson and Jacques Maritain to Walt Disney and Orson Welles, and from currents of Catholic revivalism to cultures of drug-induced hallucinations, the history of excommunication rites, and much more. All this is perhaps a manifestation of the "excess of Truth" to which St. Francis refers in Messiaen's gigantic opera *St. Francis of Assisi*. In any case, *Visions of Amen* offers much worthwhile insight for anyone willing to navigate, as Schloesser does, the stunning multidimensionality of Messiaen's life and work.

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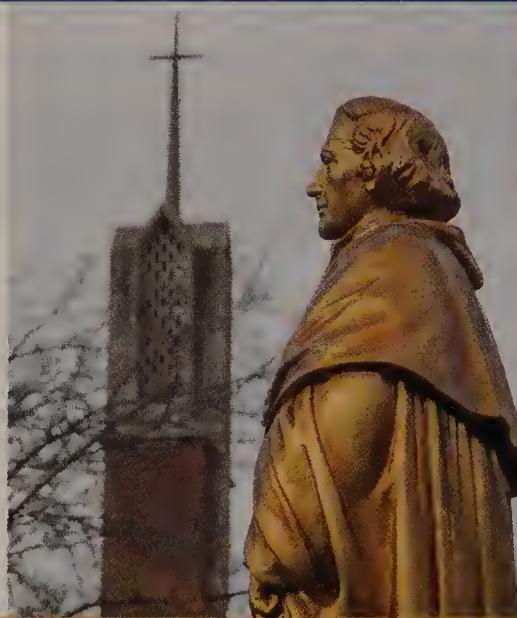
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## Sympathy for Pharaoh

Some called 2014 the year of the biblical epic. Ridley Scott's *Exodus: Gods and Kings* is the third entry in the category after *Son of God* and *Noah*, and Ang Lee reportedly has his own Exodus-based film in the works. But *Exodus* does not resemble these films as much it does Oliver Stone's 2004 film *Alexander*. That sword-and-sandal disaster signed up great actors, dragged on interminably, delivered characters who were impossible to care about, and told the story of Alexander the Great without bothering to tell us why it matters. In *Exodus*, too, great actors are wasted, the story retells and rewrites scripture without benefit, and the whole endeavor feels joyless.

As a director Scott has produced some of the best science fiction ever made (*Blade Runner*, *Alien*), and his ability to work on a grand scale is visible here. Scott's ancient Egypt is magnificent. Sculptures, pyramids, and memorials are thrown up one after another by legions of Hebrew slaves.

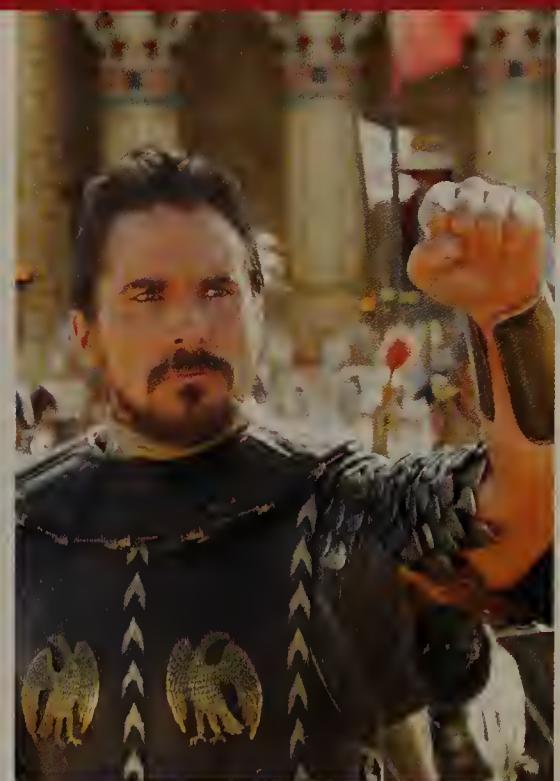
The squalor of the Hebrews' living conditions and their harsh treatment are believable. Chariots look fast and furious as dirt clods fly at the viewers' 3-D glasses during fight scenes. The Red Sea collapsing on the Egyptian army looks like the wrath of God. The angel of death approaches in the night, soft as a whisper, and life is taken from the first-born without a sound—until the wails. The camera work, computer-generated effects, and set design are not the problem; the story is.

Scott misses the deeper context that makes these biblical stories work. There is no dramatic "Let my people go!" spo-

ken by Moses (Christian Bale) to Ramses (Joel Edgerton). Instead Moses sneaks into the palace at night, puts a sword to the king's throat, and says his people deserve the same pay and rights as any Egyptian. Then the plagues start: crocodiles attack a small boat on the Nile (the scene reminded me of *Jaws*). The river is stained red with blood, which fouls the water and kills the fish. Then come flies, followed by frogs to feed on the flies. It's a quasi-naturalistic rendition of the plagues that comes off as low-grade rationalist biblical criticism. But this approach is abandoned when it comes to magical elements in the movie, like the plague of hail or the passage through the Red Sea, and you have to wonder why it's included at all.

The most sympathetic character in the film is Pharaoh. He has depth, pathos, and the deepest range of emotion. This is an interesting shift from the Bible's perspective—in Exodus the book, Pharaoh isn't even named. We see tenderness in Ramses's boyhood friendship with Moses, nervousness as he takes his throne, and blood-red anger when he seeks vengeance.

From Moses we see hardly more emotion than Bale gave us from under his bat suit in Christopher Nolan's *Dark Knight* trilogy. When he's thrown out of Egypt for being a Hebrew he seems indifferent. He's supposed to fall in love with Zipporah (María Valverde), but it's hard to tell why, or why she loves him back. This is a fine actor wasted, and he's not the only one. As Nun, Joshua's father, the majestic Ben Kingsley is given nothing to do. Sigourney Weaver, who would look queenly in blue jeans,



**DOWN IN EGYPT:** Ridley Scott's visually stunning movie wastes the talents of a respectable cast, including Christian Bale (above, as Moses).

appears in spot duty as Ramses's mother. And as Joshua, Aaron Paul (who was often the emotional epicenter of *Breaking Bad*) does no more than stare off into the distance, as though still sampling crystal meth.

Then there's God (Isaac Andrews). He's a child named Malak, who speaks to Moses at random times and places. He comes off as snotty and occasionally creepy yet mostly uninteresting. Is he Moses' childhood self? Is he the God of Abraham and Sarah? We're not told. His pronouncements are oddly indirect ("What should I do?" Moses asks. "I think you know," Malak replies).

In the book of Exodus, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob hears his people's groaning and remembers his covenant. He calls a people out into the wilderness to worship him on a specific mountain. It's a pretty good story, with themes of liberation, righteousness, faithfulness, and promise. It can be tweaked, sure. But the burden of proof is on the fruit yielded by changing the story. The fruit here is bland indeed.

Maybe Ang Lee can do better.

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*The author is Jason Byassee, senior pastor at Boone United Methodist Church in Boone, North Carolina.*

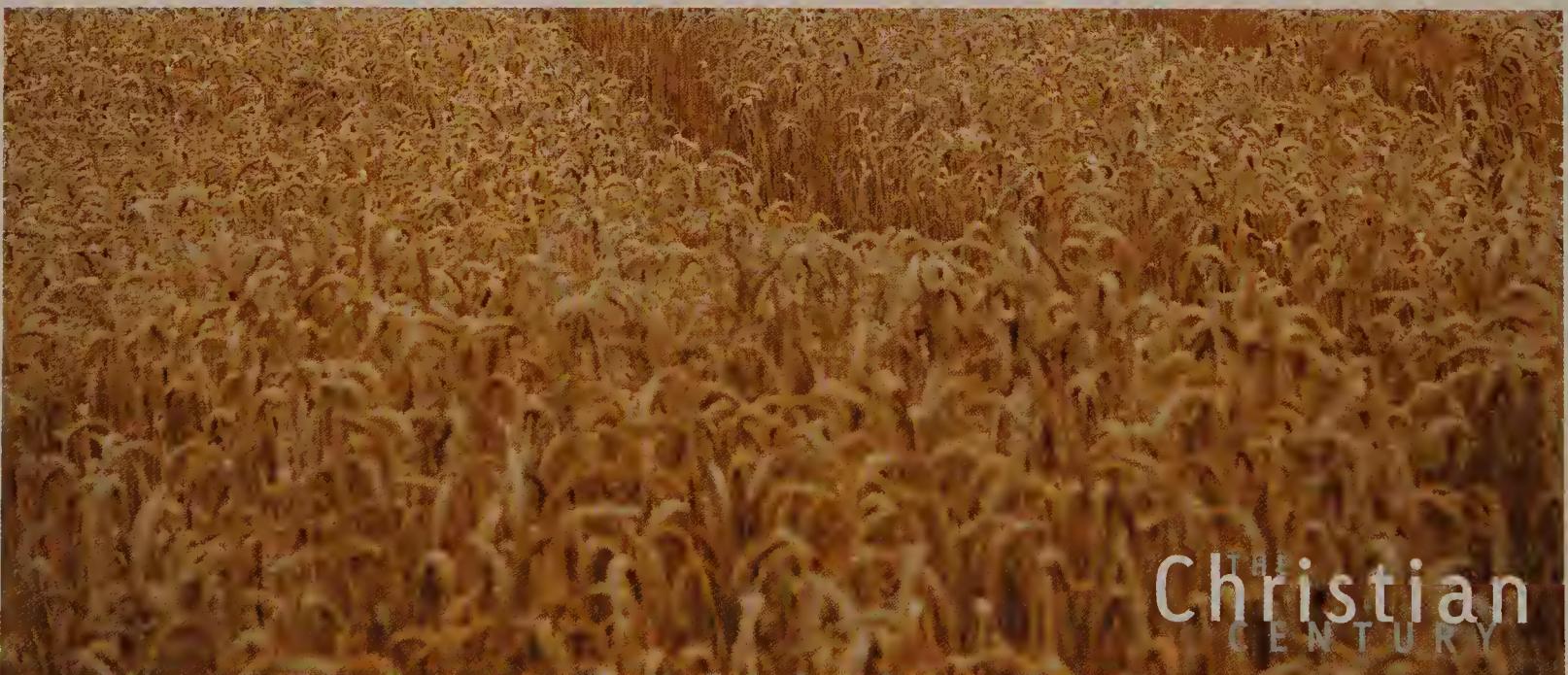


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(from *The Pastor as Minor Poet*)



by Philip Jenkins

**C**hurches in Africa and Asia often find themselves having to think seriously about issues that in the West are long forgotten. One issue these churches may have to confront is one of the oldest dilemmas for Christians—slavery.

Plenty of modern scholars have addressed the theological dimensions of human bondage, tracing the bitter conflicts between Christian slaveholders and Christian abolitionists. Far less noticed are the many situations throughout history in which Christians were themselves enslaved by nonbelievers and had to formulate ways of retaining their faith.

That issue surfaces repeatedly in the New Testament, but it did not simply go away when the Roman Empire accepted Christianity. In fact, it remained a matter for impassioned debate until quite modern times.

Today slavery is once more on the political agenda as the result of the depredations of terror groups like the Islamic State, which proudly boasts of enslaving captives in Iraq. Their statements also note the taking of Christian slaves by like-minded groups in Nigeria and the Philippines. In coming years we are likely to see many episodes such as the recent mass kidnapping of Nigerian schoolgirls. These may become so commonplace that they will cease to shock the global conscience.

One response is to consider intervention and rescue, or

crushing the perpetrators. But let us assume that such actions are not immediately effective and that Christian populations find themselves in long-term captivity. How can churches understand these actions, and how can ordinary believers respond?

Such questions form the subject of a remarkably long literature created in urgent response to desperate practical needs. The famous writings of Ireland's St. Patrick, for example, focused heavily on the situation of Christian slaves, above all that of abducted women subjected to sexual exploitation. He praised their astonishing resilience and their ability to maintain their faith.

Commonly, the slavemasters of Christians have been Islamic rather than pagan. From the 14th century onward, Turkish Muslims expanded their power over the rapidly shrinking Byzantine Empire, conquering heavily Christian territories in Anatolia and southeastern Europe. Islamic holy warriors carried out raids deep into infidel territories, making Christians dread these *ghazi* raids or *razzias*.

Between 1500 and 1800, Christian Europe was multiply assailed by raiders and slave traders as North African pirate fleets ranged as far as Iceland and Ireland. Many thousands of Christians, including clergy, found themselves facing lifelong servi-

tude in Muslim societies or decades of hunger, toil, and torment. (Of course, Christians in these years also held many Muslim slaves.)

How should Christians respond to enslavement? In the 14th century Greek bishops urged captives to retain their faith at all costs. Churches also tried to succor or ransom captives.

That effort inspired Catholic religious orders such as the Mercedarians, who placed themselves under Our Lady of Ransom. (The order will celebrate its 800th anniversary in 2018.) Apart from collecting and channeling money to free slaves, members of the order added a special vow that they would personally give up their own freedom and even their lives if that was required to free Christ's faithful. In one famous case in 1240, a brother named Serapion pledged himself as a hostage in exchange for some captives. When a ransom was not forthcoming, Algerian Muslims crucified him.

Martin Luther was also agonizingly aware of slavery. In 1520, discussing the right of a Christian community to choose and ordain clergy without episcopal approval, he imagined "a little group of pious Christian laymen taken captive and set down in a wilderness." Surely, said Luther, those captive Christians must choose clergy

from among their number to carry out the sacraments and preserve their faith, even if that meant going outside traditional church institutions.

Luther's concerns grew more urgent following the Ottoman occupation of Christian Hungary and the siege of Vienna, when Islamic forces threatened to push deep into Germany. During that crisis, he addressed himself to the many Christians who had already fallen into captivity and the still larger number who might soon follow them. He urged them to obey their unbelieving masters, as St. Paul had instructed his own contemporaries. Christian slaves should not seek to escape but rather accept their miserable condition as their personal Calvary. Above all, they should resist conversion, even if that would vastly ease their suffering.

The best hope that Luther could offer slaves was the belief that Ottoman successes portended the approaching end times. As it did for African Americans in later centuries, slavery generated an apocalyptic hope.

Patrick, Luther, the Mercedarians—these figures developed thoughtful Christian responses to the nightmare of slavery. It is horrible to think that modern churches might need to rediscover their lessons.

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*Philip Jenkins recently wrote The Great and Holy War: How World War I Became a Religious Crusade.*

## Christians in slavery

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PASTORAL RESPITE—Located on the northern shores of Lake George, Silver Bay YMCA is a conference center that offers private and shared baths with meals for pastors and their immediate family members. Availability: September through May. No charge; donations accepted. For more information, call (518) 543-8833, ext. 215, or visit our website at [www.silverbay.org](http://www.silverbay.org).

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### POSITIONS AVAILABLE

The Larchmont Avenue Church ([lacny.org](http://lacny.org)) is a vibrant Presbyterian community church of more than 800 members. We are an active, intellectually engaged multigenerational congregation located in southern Westchester County, NY, within easy reach of New York City. Our 100-year-old congregation is a dynamic worshiping community that embraces Protestant traditions while engaging our members and those beyond with progressive programs that serve all ages. We are seeking an ASSOCIATE PASTOR to enhance and grow a vibrant YOUTH MINISTRY PROGRAM, including confirmation classes, as well as support our mission work both locally and abroad. In addition, the associate pastor will help lead the celebration of worship with joy and enthusiasm and assist the senior pastor in pastoral care, including counseling and visitation. The successful candidate will be open-minded, articulate, confident, skilled in working cooperatively, and technologically savvy. The work of creating a deeply meaningful, visible, and creative youth ministry that upholds the spiritual lives of today's youth will inspire her or him. Inquiries and PIFs should be forwarded to Kim Christiansen, Chairman, Associate Pastor Nominating Committee, [APNC@lacny.org](mailto:APNC@lacny.org).

St. Paul Lutheran Church (ELCA), Davenport, IA, is conducting a national search to fill the open position of DIRECTOR OF FAITH FORMATION. This position is responsible for planning and developing imaginative adult learning opportunities, providing administrative leadership for a large and high-powered confirmation ministry, managing a range of existing and new learning and support-based groups within the church, guiding a learning team of colleagues, and offering spiritual leadership. To learn more about this position and the St. Paul Lutheran Church setting, we invite you to visit <http://stpaulqc.org/employment>.

# HUNGER READS THE MORNING PAPER, TOO.

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*Joseph and Mary: Wedding Portrait (working title)*, by Jim Larson

During Advent and Christmas, Christians hear stories of prophets, shepherds, night skies, angel announcements, a star, traveling Magi, and wanderers. An exploration of past and future, of expected and curious symbols, and of mystery—these also are central in the work of Jim Larson. A traditional woodworker and liturgical artist at House of Mercy, a church in St. Paul, Minnesota, Larson merges Western art, biblical and historical narratives, and traditional and nontraditional symbolism. This oil-on-canvas diptych titled *Joseph and Mary: Wedding Portrait* is part of a series based on Jean-François Millet's and Vincent van Gogh's *The Sower*, where the sower is transformed into Mary with the Christ-child, and the Passion is attested to by raven, goldfinch, and skull. "The narratives might remain elusive," Larson writes. "But that's OK; the stories they grow out of are pretty strange to begin with."

*Art selection and comment by Lil Copan, a painter and editor in Boston.*

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